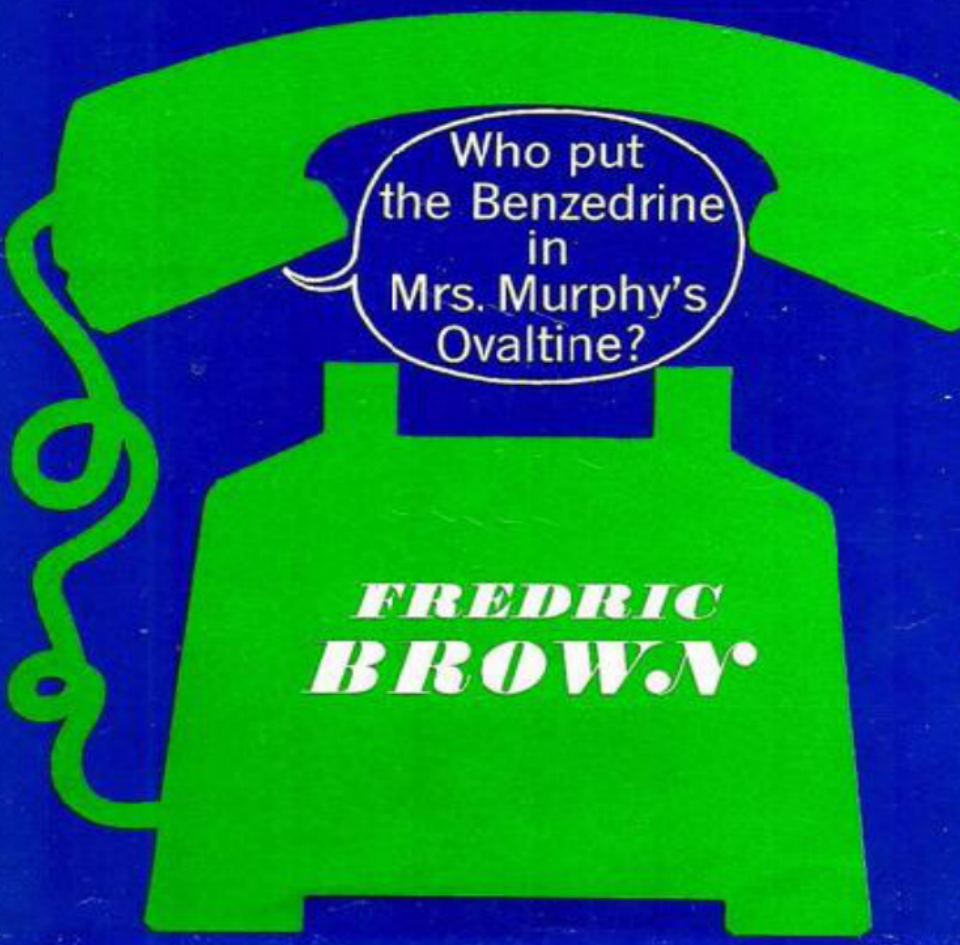


MRS. MURPHY'S UNDERPA.NTS

A Dutton Novel of Mystery & Suspense



Who put
the Benzedrine
in
Mrs. Murphy's
Ovaltine?

***FREDRIC
BROWN***

MRS. MURPHY'S UNDERPANTS

Fredric Brown

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MRS. MURPHY'S UNDERPANTS

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Chapter One

I was lying on my bed that evening with a broken rib and a broken trombone. The rib would heal but I'd just decided that the trombone wouldn't.

I'd broken them both the evening before, going down the stairs on my way to a strictly amateur jam session with a few guys I'd got to know who like to get together for an evening every couple of weeks to make noise. My toe had caught in a tear in the stair carpeting, a tear that hadn't been there before, a few steps from the bottom, and I'd taken a header into a three-point landing, the first point of which had been the end of the trombone case. It had knocked the wind out of me for a minute and had hurt, but no worse than when you stub your toe or kick your ankle against something. Mrs. Brady, our landlady, heard the crash and came running from her apartment at the back of the first floor; she got there and was fussing over me like a mother hen before I even got up. My first thought wasn't either for myself or the trombone—I don't bruise easily, and the case should have protected the trombone—but for the carpeting. Somebody could break his neck on it. Uncle Am had heard too and came down from our room; he said he'd tack the carpeting and I could run along if I was *sure* I wasn't hurt. And that started Mrs. Brady again, and the only way I could get out of the house was to promise to stop and see Dr. Yeager, who lived only a few doors away, and let him check me over before I went on to the jam session. He had me strip to the waist and poked a finger where I said it hurt a little, and I said ouch. Then he listened with a stethoscope and had me cough a little and told me I had a broken rib; he'd heard a pop—and I'd felt it. He taped me up and told me there was no reason why I couldn't go on to the jam session, to listen, but he doubted if I'd feel like blowing a wind instrument for at least a couple of weeks. I took a deep breath for size and decided he was right. So I went back home and called up to call off my showing up at the session, and played gin rummy with Uncle Am instead.

The next morning my side was even sorer and Uncle Am talked me into staying home and letting him hold down the office for at least one day. We didn't have any cases on hand anyway at the moment, and it would be just a matter of sitting around hoping for one to come in. He promised to phone me if anything came up that he couldn't handle by himself.

Maybe I should tell you that my name is Ed Hunter and that my uncle, Ambrose Hunter, and I run a two-man private detective agency from an office in a building on Wabash Avenue just north of the Chicago Loop. And room

together on Huron Street, also on the Near North Side, not too far away. We're not getting rich, but we get by, and we get along pretty well together. My Uncle Am is shortish, fattish, and smartish; he's in his forties and has most of his hair and a scraggly mustache that I keep trying to talk him into getting rid of. I'm still in my twenties and still single, although I've had some narrow escapes. Uncle Am is, by now, a perennial bachelor. Anyway, the accident was a little over twenty-four hours old and I was just getting around to checking out the trombone after all. And finding that I'd been too optimistic in thinking that because the case hadn't been damaged, neither had the instrument. The jar had sprung either the slide or the tubing onto which it fitted, or was supposed to fit. Maybe it could be repaired, and I'd certainly find out, but I had a hunch it couldn't be. You think of a trombone as being a fairly rugged piece of plumbing, but it isn't, not that part of it. A dent in the horn part doesn't matter, but denting or bending of the slide means you've probably had it. You can't even buy a new slide for an old trombone; those two basic parts are made together and fitted together and that's that.

Which gets me back where I started, on my bed with a broken rib and a broken trombone. I put the instrument back in the case and put the case away.

It was still early, not much after nine, but I felt sleepy and considered whether I wanted to get undressed and into bed instead of on it. I decided just to take a nap as I was. Whenever Uncle Am came home he might be in the mood to go out for a beer or a nightcap, or might even phone to ask if I wanted to meet him somewhere. If I got an hour or two of shuteye now I'd probably want to, but not if it meant getting dressed again from bare hide.

So I reached up and turned off the light and of course found I wasn't sleepy after all.

I hadn't the faintest idea when Am would get home, or phone. He'd called up late in the afternoon and said a job—a tail job—had just come in and he'd be working on it this evening. He was to pick up the subject when she left her hairdresser's after a four-thirty appointment and stay with her until she got home, whether that was right away or the next morning. All I knew by now was that she hadn't gone *right* home, but she could still make it a short evening.

I'd been lying there just a minute or two when a very slight sound made me open my eyes and look toward the door of the room. The sound seemed to have been the click of a light switch—and that's what it had been, because before there'd been a crack of light under the door and now there wasn't. Someone had just turned off the upstairs hallway light, and that didn't make sense because nobody would have had a legitimate reason for doing it. It's not a very bright bulb because there's no reason for it to be, but such as it is, it stays on all night once it gets turned on at dark.

I reached up for the switch of the lamp I'd just turned off, thinking to light it first and then look out into the hallway, and just had my hand on it when I heard another sound that made me freeze that way.

There was a faint but stealthy sound of movement in the hallway, just outside our door. And the door itself started to open inward, very slowly.

I kept my hand on the lamp switch, but didn't turn it on. If I did, I'd be giving an advantage away. I'd been in the dark for a while and my eyes were accustomed to it. I could see the outlines of furniture, the shape of the opening door. I'd have a silhouette, however dim, of whoever was coming through it. He, on the other hand, had turned out the light on his side of the door only seconds ago.

But the panicky thought hit me that maybe he had a gun and maybe I should make a try to get to the one in the upper drawer of Uncle Am's dresser. We don't carry guns often in the type of work we do, but we have one apiece at the office and the extra one, an old revolver, we keep in the room just in case. Well, this might be the case all right, so why the hell wasn't it under my pillow instead of across the damn room?

But the door was open wide now and someone was coming through it and I could hardly believe the little that my eyes told me in the dimness. He was *small*—a midget or a kid. If it was a kid, he couldn't be over nine or ten years old.

He was closing the door behind him now. Then he was feeling his way along the wall to the right of the door—and I'd been right, because of the care with which he felt his way, that he couldn't see as well as I could. I let him make it as far as the dresser (my dresser, not Uncle Am's with the extra gun in it), and I knew he could never get the door open and get through it before I could get him, so I flicked on the switch.

And then I had my back against the door and—both of us blinking in the sudden light—he was frozen in the act of opening a dresser drawer, looking at me over his shoulder with frightened eyes.

He was a kid, a boy a little younger than I'd guessed in the dark. Eight maybe, rather than nine or ten. Neat and well dressed, not the dirty urchin I'd expected. His slightly wavy hair was neatly combed and his face was clean. I didn't know him, but he looked familiar somehow, like someone I'd seen around the neighborhood. "Well, kid," I said. "What's the idea?" Some of the fright went out of his eyes and a touch of what seemed to be defiance was substituted for it. He straightened up and faced me squarely, at any rate.

"You got me," he said. "Go ahead and call the cops."

I realized that I was still standing in front of the closed door with my arms out to hold it shut, and I felt foolish. I relaxed a little. I said, "Let *me* worry about calling the cops if I decide to. I want to know what this is all about first. Maybe this is something your father should have a chance to straighten out. Who is your father?"

He didn't answer.

I let that one go and tried, "What's your name?"

"You got me. Go ahead, call the cops."

"That's a funny name," I said. "Let's get back to my first question: What's the idea? Is this your idea of fun, or do you need money worse than you look as though you need it?"

"Money!" he said, as though it was a swearword. "I got lots of money." He

proved it, partly, by reaching into a hip pocket and showing me a pinseal wallet, then putting it back.

I said, "All right, you probably have more money than I have. But what were you looking for, then?"

"A gun."

I felt like sitting down. I remembered that there is a snap lock on the inside of our door that we seldom use because it sticks and is hard to open. With it thrown he wouldn't be able to get out of the door before I could get to him even if I didn't stand between him and it. I threw it and went back to the edge of the bed and sat down. I waved a hand at Uncle Am's favorite chair, which was near where he stood. "Sit down, kid," I said. "That bit about the gun was too much or not enough. We're going to have to do some talking."

"What for? Call the cops. Or take me to them." But he sat down on the arm of the chair.

"Not if this takes all night, till I know what I'm doing. What made you think you'd find a gun *here*? Or were you just canvassing the neighborhood for one?"

"You're a detective. I don't know your name, but I know—somebody told me, I mean—*two* detectives live here. You and your father."

"My uncle, for the record. And yes, we have guns but not here. We keep them at the office. All right, now we know why you tried here. But here comes the *big* question. What do you want with a gun?"

No answer.

"We've got all night," I said. "We're not going to go to the police or even get to first base till you tell me the score."

He glared at me for a moment, but then he began to realize he wasn't as tough as he thought he was; his lower lip began to tremble.

"Because some men are going to kill my father. I heard them talking about it."

"When and where?"

"At home, this afternoon." He gathered momentum now that he'd started. "I had to take a nap—something I ate for lunch upset my stomach and I had to lie down. I heard them talking just outside my room."

"Kid," I said, "you could have dreamed it. You were taking a nap."

"I didn't mean really a nap. I didn't go to sleep, just lay down."

"I gather you didn't tell your father about this?"

"He wouldn't have believed me either. He'd've said I dreamed it, just like you say. I didn't, Mr. Hunter."

"Slight slip, kid. Before, you didn't know my name. But that's not important—I suppose you had to case the job."

"I'd heard it but I'd forgotten it, honest. I just happened to remember. Do you think I'm telling the truth, Mr. Hunter?"

"Well, let's say I think you think you're telling the truth. But you sure got hold of the wrong end of the stick in the way you're handling it. Now here's how *I'm* going to handle it—whether you like it or not. No cops. Not yet anyway. Listen—you get along good with your father? You're not afraid of

him, are you?"

"I—I love him."

"Good. Then I'll take you to him and you're going to tell him just what you've told me. Or if you won't open up, I'll tell him. What to do about it, or about you, is his decision to make."

"No!" The defiance was back now. "And besides, you *can't* because I haven't told you who I am."

I shook my head. "But you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"That I'm a detective. Want to hear me make a deduction?"

"What?"

"That your name and address are in that nice wallet in your left hip pocket." I stood up and held out my hand. "Let's see it."

He *hadn't* thought of it. He slid off the arm of Uncle Am's chair and started to back around behind it. "No!"

I said patiently, "Hand it over, kid. I'm bigger than you are and there's no place to run. I'll take it away from you if I have to, but don't make me."

Especially, I thought, with this broken rib; a struggle, even with a kid, would hurt like hell.

He handed it over reluctantly, but he handed it over. There was money in it, I couldn't help seeing, a few bills, but I didn't look to see whether they were singles or hundreds. I opened it only to read what was typed on the card under the glassine insert. Michael Dolan, his name was. And under the ready-printed line "In Case of Illness or Accident Notify:" was what I was looking for. The person to be notified was a Vincent Dolan, with a telephone number and an address only about one block from where we live.

Then I did an almost double-take. *A* Vincent Dolan or *the* Vincent Dolan? I mean the Vincent Dolan who was a big wheel—not *the* big wheel but *a* big wheel—in Chicago sporting circles, if you consider horse racing a sport. Not a bookie himself, but a man behind bookies who kept them in line, let them lay off bets too big for them to handle, and arranged bail for them when they needed it.

But the name didn't go with the address. A man like that made money. And Huron Street, Near North Side, isn't Lake Shore Drive.

"What does your father do, Michael?" I asked the kid.

"Mean you haven't heard of him? He's famous. He works for the *syndicate*."

Well, that answered my question, and a kid should be proud of his father, as Mike Dolan obviously was. And, for all I knew, with full justification. I didn't know anything against Vincent Dolan except the fact that his business was technically outside the law. But then again I've laid a few bets with bookies in my life and that makes me as criminal as a bookie.

I handed back the wallet. "Yes, I've heard of him," I said. "Wait till I put on shoes and a coat, and we'll be on our way."

Going down the stairs and outside I didn't try to hold him by the arm. He could have broken and run, and likely got away from me, but I knew he wouldn't; now that I had his father's name and address, he was stuck. He'd have to face the music anyway, whenever he did get home.

The outside of the building didn't answer any questions for me. It was typical of the block and the neighborhood in general—a three-story stone front not quite flush with the sidewalk but almost. Three worn steps led up to the front door, and as we went up them the kid took a key from his pocket and aimed it at the lock, but I stopped him.

“Better let me ring,” I said. “I'll feel better doing it that way my first time here, even under such august auspices.”

I rang the bell.

Chapter Two

The man who opened the door didn't seem to fit my idea of what Vincent Dolan would look like. He was big, plenty big, but a little too young for the role, about my own age, give or take a year or two. Which didn't mean, of course, that he couldn't be the father of an eight-year-old, although he'd have had to get an awfully early start to do it. But he just didn't look like anybody's father. He looked like Hollywood, by way of Muscle Beach. Too good-looking, even though it was in a rugged way.

He asked me, "Yes?" without either cordiality or animosity, but before I could even start to answer that all-embracing question his eyes happened to go down—a long way down from his height—and see the kid. "Mike!" he said. "What the h—You're supposed to be in bed. Aren't you?"

I'd definitely decided by now that he wasn't Vincent Dolan, so I interrupted. "Is Mr. Dolan here?" And then, realizing that I didn't know how many Dolans there were, "Mr. Vincent Dolan?"

He stepped back. Maybe he wouldn't have, at least as readily, if I hadn't had Mike as a ticket of admission.

"Yeah," he said. "He's here."

And Mr. Dolan proved it by stepping through a doorway into the hall. He was a wizened little Irishman of maybe fifty. And it was his turn to look startled at Mike. "Mike boy! What happened? Where were you?"

And before anybody could answer anybody the situation got further complicated by the appearance of an angel at the head of a stairway to which the hallway led. A raven-haired Irish beauty of an angel, somewhere around twenty and not wizened at all.

And she said, "Mike! What on earth—?"

I decided somebody had better take charge, so I did. I said, "Mr. Dolan, Mike is all right, and everything can be explained. But he has something to tell you that I think you should listen to *alone*. It may be nothing of importance, or it may be something very private and personal."

Mike said, "Dad, he caught me fair and square. I was—"

"Hold it, Mike. Only your father should hear this, the first time. After that, it's his decision whether other people should know about it."

Dolan nodded shortly. "In here." He stepped back through the doorway behind him and Mike and I followed. I closed the door behind me; it looked like a good thick door, near enough soundproof not to matter, at least unless somebody started yelling.

The room was somewhere between a den and a study, with overtones of being a library too; one whole wall was solid with books. The furniture and drapes obviously didn't come from any bargain basement. And now I remembered the hallway with its thick but chaste solid maroon carpeting, the wide graceful sweep of the staircase at the end of it. And from that, and this one room, I suddenly saw why Dolan lived on Huron Street. He wanted to live in a building that looked like ten cents on the outside and a million dollars once you were through the front door.

I liked the idea.

We sat down. Mike looked worried, but not afraid. Dolan was frowning, but it was more a puzzled frown than an angry one.

"All right, Mike," he said.

"Let me introduce myself first, Mr. Dolan," I interrupted him, "and then Mike can have the floor. I'm Ed Hunter and I'm a private detective, but I'm not working on a case. I'm here because Mike learned somewhere in the neighborhood—I live only a block or so from here—that I *am* a detective, and came to me, or rather to my room, for that reason. Okay, Mike, take it away."

Mike gulped, and then took it away. And told it straight—or at least told it exactly the same way he'd told it in my room half an hour before. Except then I'd had to pull details out of him one at a time, and now he was self-winding. Dolan didn't interrupt once, and even when Mike had run down, he waited half a minute and then asked gently, "That's it, Mike? All of it?" And Mike nodded.

Dolan waited another half a minute. "Mike, I know you're not lying, but it just couldn't have happened. Whether you think so or not, you simply *must* have dreamed it. Believe me. Now the other point, the important one. Your going out to steal a gun, to protect me with—or whatever. Mike, that's a big thing, and a bad thing. Besides being bad, it wasn't even smart."

The only answer was a slight snuffle.

"We're going to have to have a talk about that, a long talk. But it's too late for a long talk tonight, so we'll do that tomorrow. Right now you should go to bed. Right?"

Mike nodded. He got up and I started to, but Dolan stopped both of us. "Just a minute, Mr. Hunter. Can you stay, at least long enough for a drink? There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Sure," I said. What did I have to lose?

He leaned over and pressed a button somewhere. Then he leaned toward Mike and put a hand out. "Shake hands on it? Till tomorrow?" They shook hands solemnly.

The door opened and a Filipino houseboy came just inside. "A pair of drinks, Robert. Whatever this gentleman wants, and you know my order."

"Whiskey and soda will be fine," I said.

"But just a minute, Robert. Before you start the drinks, see if you can find Angela and ask her to come here a minute."

Robert bobbed a bow and vanished. Shortly to be replaced by the angel whom I now knew to be named Angela. "Honey," Dolan called her (and that fitted too), "will you take Mike upstairs and see he goes to bed? And stays there this time?"

"Of course, Dad. But first, may I ask what this is all about? Or is it still secret?"

"I'll tell you later. Oh, you two haven't met. Ed Hunter, my daughter Angela."

We met. She gave me her hand and I gave it back reluctantly, almost as reluctantly as Mike had given up his wallet.

Robert came and went silently, leaving us with drinks. Dolan put his down and got up to pace restlessly.

He said, "I hate coincidences. I suppose they do happen, but they're hard to take. Let's see if we can figure any way in which this *wasn't* one."

"*What wasn't* one?"

"This afternoon I dropped in at the office of a detective agency and engaged a man named Ambrose Hunter to follow my wife for a while. This evening his nephew, Ed Hunter, brings back my errant son who was caught trying to steal a gun. But I've got to believe your word, if I believe Mike's, that he, well, picked you out of a hat."

"My God," I said. "You may find this even harder to believe, but I didn't know until this minute what my uncle was working on. I wasn't at the office today. He phoned late this afternoon and said he'd just taken on a job for this evening. And he did mention that it was a tail job, but no names."

"I guess I can believe that. What would it have mattered, in regard to what happened this evening, whether or not you knew what your uncle was doing?"

I said, "I'm damned if I see, either. Unless you want to think I kidnapped Mike and he and I conspired to give you a cock and bull story. Or something."

"Actually, granting Mike got a sudden yen for a gun, and granting he decided that swiping one from a detective was the answer, there's no mystery about why he picked me—or us. Simple geography. A private detective tries not to advertise his profession in his own neighborhood, but word gets around. Uncle Am and I have roomed with Mrs. Brady several years now. Probably most of the neighbors—and the neighbor kids—know who and what we are. And like as not we're the only detectives, police or private, who live anywhere near that close to here."

"Now let's take it from the other end. How did you happen to pick Hunter & Hunter? Out of a phone book, at random?"

"Well, out of a phone book, but not quite at random. Geography enters in again, I guess. I suddenly made up my mind when I was in a bar on State Street, near Grand, went to a phone book and looked in the yellow pages. Your office address was in walking distance so I walked."

"That's the only coincidence, then—the fact that we live close to you and, at the moment you started flipping yellow pages, you happened to be within

walking distance of where we work.”

His face cleared. “Sure. It’s a small world, that’s all.” He sat down again and picked up his drink. “I suppose you’ll be doing some of the—uh—shadowing if I keep on with this?”

I said, “I would if we keep on with it. But I think we should resign from the case.”

He raised his eyebrows at me to ask why.

I said, “*Too* small a world. Just for an example, suppose I were following Mrs. Dolan and she picked up Mike somewhere. He’d know me. Like as not he knows my uncle by sight too. By now, if your daughter Angela is curious enough to question Mike, and she probably is, *she* knows I’m a detective. And with her knowing about Mike’s escapade tonight, you’ll probably decide to tell your wife too.”

He nodded slowly. “I suppose you’re right. And there are just the two of you?”

“Yes and no. We have an arrangement with Ben Starlock—he runs a big agency and we used to work for him before we set up shop for ourselves. When we’ve got more than we can handle, or some job we can’t handle ourselves, we can borrow operatives from him.”

“I think I’d like that. I liked your uncle a hell of a lot—and I trust him. I think I’d like him to handle the job even if he, and you, shouldn’t work openly. I’ll talk to him about it.”

“Shall I ask him to phone you? Is this phone private enough?”

“*This* one is, yes; not the general one with extensions all over the house. This one’s unlisted, but he has the number. Yes, ask him to call me tomorrow morning after ten.”

“He wasn’t going to call tonight then?”

“Not unless there was something startling to report. He can still do that if there is.” He chuckled. “Guess tonight, everything startling’s happening at our end instead of his. Well, I’m going to give Mike a chance to sleep on it; no more lecturing or questioning till he’s had a chance to do that. Like as not tomorrow he’ll not only realize how foolish what he thought was, but—what’s more important—how wrong *and* foolish what he tried to do was. Another drink?”

I said I’d better leave, and Dolan pushed the buzzer and had Robert let me out.

I was back in our room less than a quarter of an hour later when the phone rang—the private (but not unlisted) phone we’d finally had put in our room so we wouldn’t have to run downstairs every time the pay phone in the downstairs hallway rang.

Uncle Am, of course, and about time. I picked it up and asked, “Who put the coral snake in Mrs. Murphy’s layer cake?”

A startled female voice said, “*What?*”

“Sorry,” I said. “I thought this was a call I was expecting. Ed Hunter

speaking.”

“This is Angela Dolan, Mr. Hunter. We met only half an hour ago. I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Not at all, Miss Dolan. I was bored. I’m not now.”

“Mike told me the—the *awful* thing he did tonight, and I’m upset about it. I wonder if we could—meet somewhere for a drink, and talk about it. Is it too late?” It was only ten o’clock or so. But I hesitated. Apparently Dolan didn’t know his daughter was calling me, or she’d simply have asked me to drop back for another drink instead of meeting her somewhere for one. And Dolan was, at least technically, our client, and did I have any business meeting his daughter behind his back, even though what she wanted to talk about had nothing to do with the job we were doing for Dolan? I decided I did have a right. The decision took me maybe half a second.

I said I’d be delighted, and should I pick her up or what?

She said yes, but not to ring the bell. She’d come out of the door at ten-forty.

I hung up and the phone rang again almost before I could let go of it. I picked it up and this time said, “Ed Hunter speaking” the first time.

But this time it really was Uncle Am. “Hi, kid,” he said. “Who put the croton oil in Mrs. Murphy’s London broil?”

“Not bad,” I said. “Who put the Spanish fly in Mrs. Murphy’s apple pie?”

“Guess that tops mine, Ed. Listen, I think I’ll be home pretty soon. We’re in the Loop and my subject is engaged in the nefarious pastime of having coffee—and with another biddy. I’m in a phone booth that I can see them from. I think they’ll be cutting out shortly and it looks like I should be home soon. Thought I’d give you warning in case you feel in the mood to stay up for a beer.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But I just got a better offer. I’m getting ready to leave to go out.”

“Good. Anything exciting been happening?”

“Nothing I could tell you about in less than a full hour, so I’m afraid I can’t take the time now.”

“Okay. Behave yourself.”

I started behaving myself by putting on a clean shirt and my best necktie.

But maybe I’d better tell you about the game of Mrs. Murphy, which Uncle Am and I had been playing for the last couple of weeks. It’s one of the simple pleasures of the poor—thinking up Mrs. Murphy lines—with the rhyme scheme of the archetypal and difficult-to-beat: “Who put the Benzedrine in Mrs. Murphy’s Ovaltine?”

We used it as a greeting. Either one of us could come up with the best Mrs. Murphy line he’d been able to think up and the other, having had the same time interval to work in, would try to top it. Usually we agreed as to which one was the best; if we didn’t agree we called it a draw. Winning just now with: “Who put the Spanish fly in Mrs. Murphy’s apple pie?” put me, for the

moment, two up on Uncle Am, but off and on he'd been that far ahead of me, and it seesawed.

My best one to date was the macabre: "Who put the severed head in Mrs. Murphy's folding bed?" and Am's was the ridiculous: "Who put the saddle soap up Mrs. Murphy's periscope?"

I left as soon as I'd changed, because I'd have to start out by walking two blocks in the wrong direction to get our car out of the garage. We hadn't specified on the telephone whether she was expecting to be picked up in a car or afoot, but it was a warm, beautiful night and if I could talk her into a drive along the lake, I wanted to have the car with me.

I pulled in to the curb in front of Mr. Dolan's disguised mansion just on the dot of ten-forty.

As I was getting out of the car to go around it and open the door on the sidewalk side, another car—a Chevie convertible I think it was—pulled in to the curb and stopped behind our Buick. And a beautiful woman who looked to be about thirty got out of it and waved to another woman who had stayed behind the wheel and said, "'Night, darling. Thanks for the lift home." And started for the door of the Dolan place, just as Angela came out of it.

Before the convertible had backed up a little to pull out and around me, a taxi cruised by going the same way. I couldn't see into the taxi and Uncle Am didn't stick his head out of the window, but I didn't need to see him to know what was happening. Mrs. Dolan, delivered by the "biddy" with whom she'd been having nefarious coffee, had managed to arrive home, followed by Uncle Am, at the exact moment Angela Dolan had left the door and was coming down the steps to join *me*.

The taxi went on, of course; Uncle Am had followed his quarry home and was now free. But I tried not to think or even guess what the hell he was thinking—or thinking of *me*—at this particular instant. He couldn't have helped recognizing both me and our Buick.

Surprisingly enough, Mrs. Dolan and Angela greeted one another quite casually, and Angela came to the car and climbed in, while Mrs. Dolan opened the house door with a key and let herself in without even giving a curious look over her shoulder as she did so. As casually as though they passed one another a dozen times a day coming in and going out. And come to think of it, they probably did.

Uncle Am was the one of us who was puzzled right now.

Chapter Three

Because I wasn't supposed to know even as much as I did about the Dolan family, I asked a question that seemed a natural one. "Do you have a sister, Miss Dolan? The woman who went in as you came out doesn't look old enough to be your mother."

"She isn't. I mean, either my mother or old enough. My mother died twelve years ago, when I was ten. Dad married Sylvia three years later—she was twenty-two then, which makes her thirty-one now."

"Nine years older than you are, then. Just old enough though, I gather, to be Mike's mother. If I guess his age right, as being eight."

"A few months short of it."

I was still heading east on Erie. I said, "About that drink. Do you really want one? We can just drive around while we talk. It's a beautiful night."

"All right, let's. No, I don't really want a drink. Or maybe later—I mean, if I'm not asking too much of your time."

I could have told her she was welcome to my time for the rest of the night at least, but it seemed too early in our acquaintance to make such a suggestion. Even as a wisecrack.

I said, "I have no commitments, and I don't even have to go to work tomorrow. My time is your time."

She didn't make anything out of that, and I didn't either. I just drove, over toward Michigan Boulevard. I intended to take it north and then drive along the lake.

And I was content just to drive for a while. I didn't want to bring up the subject of Mike's little adventure into crime until she did. She'd phoned me and set this up; I hadn't called her. I wanted her to bring it up her own way so I could see from what angle she'd take it, specifically what her concern was. She was going to have to pump me, which would give me a chance to throw in an occasional question myself between my answers.

Besides, as far as I was concerned, I *did* have all night, and it was pleasant driving with her beside me, and if we drove all the way to Milwaukee before even mentioning her kid brother, that was all right with me. I haven't described her except to say she had black hair and wasn't wizened and I'd taken her to be about twenty—which was only two years off. Well, she was tall for a girl, slender but not too slender, had big brown eyes and that absolutely perfect milk-white skin that the pick of Irish colleens have, whether they're milkmaids or princesses.

But, Ed, I warned myself, don't get carried away. This one is an Irish princess and not an Irish milkmaid—a princess in the sense that she probably spent more money on Kleenex and nylons than I made. However clean or dirty Dolan's money was, there must be plenty of it. The simple-looking white wool dress she was wearing now might, for all I knew, have cost more money than both Hunters together made in an average week.

I just drove. For whatever reason, she too must have felt reluctant to start talking—at least about the matter she'd wanted to see me about.

And when she did break the few minutes of silence, it was from left field. "This is none of my business, Mr. Hunter, but I'm curious. When I phoned, you picked up the phone and said something I didn't understand—and then explained you'd thought the call was from someone you knew. It was so odd—something about a coral snake and a layer cake. If it's not a real secret—"

I laughed and told her exactly what it had been and about the Mrs. Murphy game and how Uncle Am and I had been playing it, and some of the best ones we'd come up with.

She laughed, and liked it. "Let me try to think up—No, don't let me, now. There are more important things to think about right now.

"Ed—I'm going to stop calling you Mr. Hunter and you'd better start calling me Angela. Or Angie, if you prefer—"

"I don't," I said. "I think Angela is a beautiful name, Angela."

"Ed, how did Mike act when you caught him in your room tonight?"

"Act? Normal enough for a kid that's caught with his hand in the jam jar. Scared at first, then a little defiant for a while, then not happy about it but accepting the inevitable when he knew I was going to take him home to face the music."

"You wouldn't say he was—psychically disturbed?"

"I don't—Wait, Angela, let's start this from the other end. I heard Mike's story twice already this evening—when I got it out of him in pieces and again when he told it to his father. Tell me just exactly what he told you when you took him upstairs—and let me see if anything was added or subtracted."

She told it. Nothing was added and nothing important was subtracted. If the kid wasn't telling a completely straight story, he had a pretty good memory. I told her so.

"Ed, one thing before I forget. One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. *Do* you have a gun in your room?"

"I told Mike no. As a matter of fact there is one, though, an old one. We keep our good hardware at the office."

"Mike might not have believed you. In case he ever gets a wild idea like that again—let's pray that he won't—will you take that old gun to the office too?"

"Tomorrow," I said. "That's a promise."

"Thanks, Ed. You don't suppose there's *any* chance he might try again tonight, though? Of course he doesn't know you're away, but—"

“My uncle’s there now. He’s an even lighter sleeper than I am. Besides—no. Whether or not Mike’s convinced yet that that conversation was something in a dream, he wouldn’t think of trying the same thing in the same place again tonight.”

I was on the Drive now, tooling northward along the lake. There was traffic, but it didn’t bother me because I wasn’t trying to make time or get anywhere.

I said, “May I ask questions a while? And if any of them get too personal, just tell me so.”

“All right, Ed. Ask.”

“I don’t even know if you have any brothers or sisters—or half-brothers or half-sisters—besides Mike.”

“That one’s easy. No.”

“Then—not counting servants, and we’ll get to them later—only four people live in that inside-out mansion? Mr. and Mrs. Dolan, you, and Mike.”

“Correct.”

“Who was the big handsome guy, the Adonis with the blond hair, who let me in this evening? He didn’t look or act like a servant.”

“He isn’t, although he works for Dad. Somewhere between a right-hand man and an errand boy—or rather something of both. He’s around a lot, but he doesn’t live there. His name is George Steck.”

I said, “Even people who are around a lot don’t ordinarily answer the door, especially in a house with servants. How come?”

“He was just leaving, as you rang the bell. He did leave while you were in Dad’s study with Dad and Mike.”

I hesitated, because the next question that came to mind was one I couldn’t possibly justify as having anything to do with Mike’s background. But she must have been fey; she answered it anyway.

“He *is* handsome, isn’t he? But if you’re wondering if I have a crush on him, the answer is that I did, slightly, three years ago when he first started to work with Dad. But Dad put a foot down on that, *hard*, and I got over it fast. No, Dad isn’t trying to marry me into society; he’s not a climber in that direction. But neither would he let marry into the rackets—even if he’s in them himself.” She laughed a little. “And as for George, he knows he’d lose his job—and probably never get another one in Chicago—if he ever even looks at me cross-eyed. So he doesn’t. George is ambitious.”

“Hopes to step into your father’s shoes?”

“Probably. And he might at that, someday. But not, as it were, into mine. I don’t even really like him any more. But aren’t we getting far afield from Mike?”

“Yes,” I said. “How is Mike’s relationship with his mother?”

“Excellent. And I’ll give it to Sylvia that she’s an excellent mother to him. Despite her weakness.

“Sylvia is an alcoholic—has been one for several years. Not an overboard

alcoholic, but she drinks a little too much and every day. She's usually tiddly by mid-afternoon, but she manages to act all right around Mike. And when she does any really heavy drinking, it's after his bedtime."

I said, "But, good Lord, with all your father's money, can't a psychiatrist help her?"

"Not the best psychiatrist in the world can cure an alcoholic who doesn't *want* to be cured. She doesn't. She could be locked up away from alcohol, but the minute she had access to it again, she'd start all over. It's a tragedy, but one that nothing can be done about until and unless she might *want* to cooperate."

"But you honestly don't think this has an effect on Mike?"

"No, I don't. Not yet, I mean. When he gets older, or if she gets worse, then yes. But if she doesn't change, it's something he'll have to learn to accept—as I accepted my own mother's death when I was ten. I got over it."

"And when you were thirteen your father brought home a new wife only nine years older than you were. Did you resent that?"

"A little at first. I got over it. My feelings toward her now are ambivalent."

"What do you mean?"

"*Ambivalent* means—"

"I know the word *ambivalent*, damn it. Also *amphibious*, *ambidextrous*, and a few other polysyllables. I mean ambivalent between what extremes?"

"Sorry, Ed, I didn't mean to impugn your vocabulary. Between liking her and not liking her, that's what I meant. Not between loving and hating: it's never been that strong in either direction. Sometimes I feel sorry for her and sometimes I—don't."

"And Mike's relationship with his father? From the little I saw of it tonight, it's a good one. But you're closer."

"Mike almost worships his father. Idolizes him."

"To the extent of—Wait, let me think how to put this correctly. Vincent Dolan is in an illegal business. To some people that makes him a criminal, to others not. Do you think Mike might think of him as a criminal and idolize him on that basis—like some people used to idolize Capone and Dillinger?"

"I never thought of that possibility—until tonight. Mike's going after that gun—That's mostly what I wanted to talk to you about. Or have you talk about to me. Or do you still have questions?"

"Not many." Maybe because I didn't like thoughts that were starting to come to me, driving wasn't fun any more. We were well north by now and nearing a place I knew of where the Drive skirted a low bluff that overlooked the lake and there was a parking area on the bluff where you could park and look out over the water. I decided to turn off and park a little while if it wasn't too crowded tonight. It wasn't, and I turned off and parked.

She slid across the seat closer to me, but I kept my hands on the steering wheel. I made myself concentrate on what I wanted to know. We'd just covered Mike's attitude toward her father; she'd told me all she could on that.

That left two more relationships to cover. Hers with her father. Hers with Mike. I hadn't expected anything unusual in either of those, and I got nothing unusual.

No, she didn't think of her father as a criminal. He made his living in an illegal business—but it was a business just the same. And not immoral, she thought. As for the legality—why should legality be a matter of geography? Right here in Chicago—or just outside it—it was perfectly legal to place a bet on a horse race or a dog race if you did it *at* the track. Why should it be illegal half a block—or a few miles—from the track? If Chicago happened to be in Nevada, or in any one of a lot of foreign countries, it *would* be legal.

It was a rationalization, I knew, because it overlooked a lot of things. Mostly the fact that doing anything that's illegal, whether it's immoral or not, on a big scale leads to bribery and corruption of police forces, either at the top or the bottom or both, and it destroys public respect for laws that *should* be obeyed—and there are at least a few that should—and leads to other and even less pleasant side effects. But morally it's just as bad to be illegal on a small scale as on a large one and hadn't I broken a law or two myself recently? Anyway, I didn't argue with her.

She didn't say that she loved her father, and admitted that she thought him a bit tyrannical in some ways, but she admired and respected him. "He may look like a comic-opera Irishman," she said, using the exact phrase that had popped into my mind a few hours ago when I'd first seen Vincent Dolan, "but he isn't. Isn't comic-opera, I mean. He's got a keen mind—and he's never stopped honing it. He's self-educated—one year of high school is all the formal education he got—but he's never stopped studying."

"I noticed that," I said. "I mean, the way he talked, and his vocabulary."

There wasn't much to ask about how she and Mike got along, but I asked it and got the answer I expected. They got along fine, as well as any brother and sister of such disparate ages. She loved Mike, and it was as simple as that. That was why she was worried about him, about tonight.

I lighted us both cigarettes and gave her hers. When that was over I discovered that somehow my right arm had got along the top of the seat, maybe because, in taking a light from my lighter, she'd moved a little closer and it would have been awkward to put my arm back between us. So I smoked with my left hand, and told my right hand to stay where it was and not drop to her shoulder.

But she felt very warm and snug so close to me.

Chapter Four

“Now about servants?” I asked her.

There were three live-in servants, she told me. Robert Sideco, the Filipino houseboy whom I’d seen, had been with them four years. Mrs. Anderson, the cook-housekeeper, had been with them ten and was almost a member of the family. And there was a colored maid-and-cleaning-woman; the current one was named Elsie but she’d been with them only a few weeks and Angela didn’t know her last name; she’d probably never heard it. Mrs. Anderson had charge of hiring and firing in the maid department.

I asked if there were any non-live-in servants or day workers. She said very seldom; on the few occasions when her father did large-scale entertaining for business purposes, one or two might be obtained through an employment agency. That hadn’t happened recently. There was no chauffeur; she and her father each had a car, his a Continental and hers a Jaguar (but an *old* one, she explained carefully), but each drove his own. Mrs. Dolan didn’t drive; when she went out without someone taking her, she used taxis.

What was my arm doing around her, and how long had it been there? I put it back on top of the seat and she laughed softly. “Put your arm back, Ed. It felt good. But—don’t you think it’s time you let me ask *one* question?”

“Sure, Angela.” I let my arm drop around her again, and she was right; it *did* feel good. As though it belonged there.

“I’ve been thinking how to word it while I’ve been answering your questions, Ed. *Why* do you think Mike acted as he did tonight? Let’s grant that he must have dropped off to sleep and had a dream; I was there, in the house, and I can’t think of any other possible answer to that part of it. But wouldn’t the normal thing be for him to come to his father, or me, or his mother, and tell us about it? Tell *one* of us, whichever one, instead of going out to try to steal a gun to protect his father himself?”

I said quietly, “Yes, I suppose that’s all one question-but it’s a pretty complicated one. Let me think a minute.”

I thought a minute.

What she was really asking me was whether Mike’s reaction to his dream or fantasy, or whatever, had been a sane one?

And damn it, it had not been. Not even for an almost-eight-year-old. Even if he really *had* heard such a conversation as he described, his reaction hadn’t been normal.

Children have fantasies of course, play cops and robbers—but would a

normal child go to the length of stealing from a stranger a real gun?

No.

There *was* something wrong in the picture. There was *something* wrong in the picture.

Whichever way you inflected it, it was true.

And it had been in hope of finding a clue that I'd asked Angie so many questions about her family and its relationships. Mike's father, his mother, his sister—surely Mike would have trusted *one* of them.

Angela stirred. "Ed, you don't have to answer. You already have, in a sense, by not answering right away."

"I'm afraid so, Angela," I said. "But I think that, whatever it is, your father will find out and do something about it. The bright spot is that he, your father, is as smart as he is. Right now he's thinking along the same lines we are—and he's the one in the best position to talk to Mike and find out the full score. And he'll do something about it if something needs doing."

"You mean such as—taking Mike for therapy?"

"I imagine so, if he decides it's necessary. Has Mike ever, on any previous occasion, done anything that seemed abnormal for his age at the time?"

"No. Never. At least, not that I know of. I'm not home all the time. Most of it, the last few years. But I attended an out-of-town school for two years, which would have been when Mike was—oh, about four and five years old."

"What kind of school does he go to? A private one?"

"No, a public school. His grades and conduct reports are good—not spectacular, but well above average. He's not in any way retarded."

I said, "He certainly doesn't give that impression. I mean, he seems pretty bright for his age. I really think, Angela, his father will handle things properly. If he'd reacted by either brushing it off or by thinking he could settle it with a session in the woodshed, then I think you might have something to worry about."

She sighed. "Thanks, Ed. I guess that's about as good an answer as you could have given me. Tell me something about yourself."

That was easy to do, and I found myself telling her about myself, about Uncle Am, and how we got together and became private detectives, and so on.

But I didn't go into any details or specific cases and it didn't take long to tell, and after that we just sat quietly for a few minutes looking out over the lake. There was a moon, overhead and not in our range of vision through the windshield, that gave enough light to make the water silvery and mysterious. We could even see the waves, quiet and gentle.

And quiet and gentle was the kiss I found myself, without any premeditation at all, giving her. I don't even remember starting it.

Then her lips moved under mine and her hand went behind my head and pulled me tighter, and the kiss exploded. Things happen suddenly like that, once in a long while. Suddenly I knew that she wanted me as badly as I wanted her, and we clutched one another until I suddenly gave a gasp of pain

and pulled away.

“Ed, what’s—?”

My voice was a little shaky—but not from pain; that had been sharp but brief when she’d put her hand right over the break—when I told her what had happened to my rib.

“Oh, Ed, I’m sorry I hurt you. I’ll be careful.”

And she was, when I kissed her again. She kept her hand, the one that wasn’t between us, behind my head or around my shoulders. Except, when my hand first touched her breast, to cover it and press it more tightly against her.

After a while, “Ed, I *want* you. Dare we—here?”

I told her it wasn’t safe. The cops checked that particular parking area too frequently, looking for people just like us. But a couple of miles farther north a string of motels started...

So we started for the nearest motel, and got there.

She was gentle and she was wonderful and my rib didn’t hurt. Not too much anyway.

I drove back the way we’d come, and everything was the same, on the surface, or almost the same. She sat a little closer. I drove a little faster, and then it occurred to me that maybe it didn’t matter what time I got her home; I hadn’t asked her.

I glanced at my wrist watch. “It’s a few minutes after one,” I said. “Is that late, or shall we stop for a drink or two?”

“One, maybe. Another half hour won’t matter.”

So I cut over from the Drive to Clark Street and went south on it, past Bughouse Square. In the few blocks between it and Huron there are plenty of bars but most of them are lowbrow and noisy. Then I spotted The Green Cat and remembered it as one of the least noisy and started to look for a place to park. I had to overshoot only half a block to find one, and we walked back.

The Green Cat wasn’t crowded. We had a choice of booths and picked a secluded one, and the only waitress on duty came right away to take our orders.

We didn’t talk about Mike while we had our drinks. She decided against a second one and I drove her home. On the way I said, “Angela, this may never come up because I’ll probably never hear from your father again. But if I should, I should know this. Are you going to tell him about our conversation tonight?”

“I—I don’t think I will, Ed. I don’t want him to know I was that worried about Mike. He’s worried enough himself.”

“Okay,” I said. I swung the Buick in at the curb and went around to let her out.

“Thanks, Ed, again. And you’d better not come to the door. It’s so late I’d better dash right in.”

It was only a ten-yard dash, but I decided to stand and watch that she made

it safely. She took only two steps and turned. "Oh, Ed. One final question I almost forgot to ask."

"Shoot," I said.

"Who put the dying mule in Mrs. Murphy's swimming pool?"

Then she was dashing again. Even if I'd had a Mrs. Murphy on the tip of my tongue, I'd have had to yell it at her. So I just watched until she had let herself in and got back in the Buick and drove it to the garage.

Uncle Am was still awake. Wide awake.

"My God, kid," he said, before I even got the door closed. "I tail a suspect home—and you don't even know who I'm working for—and there you are taking her daughter out. What kind of a crazy coincidence is that?"

"More crazy than coincidental," I said. "I mean, the coincidence part can be explained. Besides, it was your subject's stepdaughter."

"Thought it must be, from their comparative ages. But how come? I've been biting my fingernails." He reached and turned on the bed lamp so I could see better to hang up the clothes I was starting to take off. "Start talking."

I said, "It starts about five hours ago, with a broken trombone."

"You mean you did break it last night when you fell?"

"Bent it, yes. I don't know whether or not it can be fixed. But don't tell Mrs. Brady."

"What's she got to do with it?"

I sighed. "I shouldn't have mentioned the trombone. But since I did let's finish with it first. If we tell Mrs. Brady, she's going to claim she owes us for replacing it. Strictly legally, she does. The carpeting was defective. Didn't she insist that I tell Doc Yeager to put whatever he charged me on her bill?"

"Did you?"

"Yes, just to avoid the argument she'd have given us otherwise; it won't be over a few bucks. A new trombone's something different. She's a nice old gal and we've been with her a long time; she's no richer than we are, and I don't want her to think she should—"

"All right, all right. I'm with you. Subject of trombone closed. Besides that, what started five hours ago?"

I grinned at him. "A story that's going to take five hours to tell, if I go into the details. And you'll want me to, because it does fit in, maybe, with the job you're doing for Dolan. So tell yours first. It must be shorter."

"It is. Dolan—I presume by now you know who he is?"

"By now," I said, "I know more about the whole Dolan tribe than their family doctor. That part you can skip."

"All right. Dolan wanted his wife tailed. I tailed her. She didn't go anywhere or do anything, but when she goes home—there *you* are. Your turn."

"No, no, you can't get by that easy. Your story's got *some* details, and let's get them on the line first, so we can see how they interlock with mine."

He sighed deeply. "All right, I'll be patient. Want the fight out?"

I was down to shorts by then, ready to get in bed. I said, "Leave it on. We'll probably want to smoke a few cigarettes and I don't like smoking in the dark."

"You sound like it *is* going to be a long story."

"Five action-packed hours, starting with a raid on this very room by a gun-crazy hoodlum and ending with my being seduced by an Irish princess."

I was lighting a cigarette and he said, "Light me one too, huh?"

I lighted one for him.

He said, "Dolan came into the office somewhere around three o'clock. I don't know how he happened to pick our agency, but—"

I said, "He was having a drink in a bar when he finally decided to call *an* agency. He looked in the yellow pages of a phone book and picked us because our office was only a couple of blocks away, walking distance."

Uncle Am looked at me for a long time. "Kid," he said, "if you know everything, then who closed the toilet seat on Mrs. Murphy's parakeet?"

He'd have caught me completely off base if I hadn't remembered the one Angela had just tossed at me, about dying mule in the swimming pool. He said it was better than his and wanted to give me the round, but I admitted mine wasn't original and gave it to him instead, which still left me one round ahead.

He said, "When he said he wanted his wife followed, I turned him down at first, on the grounds that we don't handle divorce work, but he said it wasn't anything like that. We're sticking to that no-divorce-work thing, aren't we, kid?"

"Yes," I said. "And I'll admit it kind of threw me when Dolan told me you were tailing his wife. But I knew there must have been something unusual—and later I learned Mrs. D. is an alcoholic. That's the angle, isn't it?"

"Yes. Then I can skip that part and—"

"Please don't. I'd like to hear how Dolan put it up to you."

"All right. He said—and made it sound convincing—that there was no question of a divorce involved. He and his wife are already estranged and are living together for the sake of a son—You've met the son?"

I said, "He's the gun-crazy hoodlum I mentioned before. Hit this part in as much detail as he used in giving it to you, Uncle Am. It's an angle nobody touched on, to me."

"Okay, the boy loves both of them and vice versa. Because of him, at least till he's older, Dolan doesn't want a divorce and wouldn't give her one if she wanted it. They have a gentleman's agreement to keep up the pretense of marriage for the boy's sake. She can keep on drinking, as long as it's at home and stays under control whenever the boy's around. But she has given her absolute promise never to drink away from home, especially in bars. She's kept the promise about being under control at home, he says.

"And for a while she seldom left home, but lately she's been going out more and more often, and he suspects she's gone back to drinking in bars, and

that he won't put up with, because if she's started it, then sooner or later she'll get herself in a jam and—maybe do something that'll hurt Mike, directly or indirectly, even more than a divorce would. As long as she keeps her side of the bargain, he'll keep his. If she doesn't, he'll lower the boom—and before anything bad happens instead of after.”

“But *what* boom, outside of divorce?”

“He'll have her committed, and tell Mike she's in a hospital. Which will be true, in a way. And that's a real lever because it's the one thing she's really afraid of, *having* to stop drinking, for whatever period of commitment.”

It sounded like a pretty tragic arrangement, but I guess alcoholism can be a pretty tragic thing for someone who doesn't even want to fight it.

Or was the real tragedy Dolan's?

Uncle Am was going on. “He said today would be a good day to start the surveillance because he could tell me just when and where to pick her up. She'd left home about one o'clock; she had an appointment with her dentist at half-past. And then she was going to do some shopping and had an appointment with her hairdresser at four-thirty.

“He gave me the name and address of the hairdresser—on Randolph in the Loop—and a description of his wife. I picked her up when she left there at five-ten. She didn't go near a bar. She killed time till a little before six, window-shopping, and then went to a restaurant where she met the woman who drove her home later—presumably a six o'clock dinner date. They ate and went to a movie. They came out of the movie about ten and walked to a coffee shop for a post-movie snack.

“That was when I phoned you, while they were having coffee. They came out of the coffee shop about ten-twenty and walked to a parking lot. Got into a Chevrolet convertible that the other woman had presumably parked there before the dinner-date meeting.

“I caught a cab just in time not to lose them. The other woman drove Mrs. Dolan home, and as my cab went past who would you guess I saw picking up a girl from the same address Mrs. Dolan went home to? Which reminds me, does that part go in my report?”

“No,” I said. “You'll see why when I get through talking, so I won't anticipate now. That's all? Sounds like you had a dull evening.”

“It was. And that's all, kid. Oh, I've got a few details to fill out a report—like description of the dame she met, license number of the Chevie convertible. Kid, before *you* get going, have you got the answer to why a guy with Dolan's dough would live at an address like that, only two blocks from here?”

“I've got it and I'll get to it. But, Uncle Am, when he *gave* you his address, didn't it occur to you it was too damn close to where we live, with so many people right around here knowing by now what kind of work we do?”

“Sure it did, Ed. But by the time he got around to mentioning addresses I'd already listened to his tale of woe and accepted the job. I figured I'd just take

on the first round myself and we'd borrow one of Ben Starlock's boys after today. That is, if Dolan wants to continue. I'm to phone him at ten tomorrow with my first report. Cigarette?"

I lighted one for each of us and Uncle Am said, "Well, kid?" and I pulled my mind back five hours and said, "Well, it started thisaway..."

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Chapter Five

It didn't, of course, take me five hours to tell what had happened—short of intimate details—in the preceding five, but it did take almost half an hour.

When I finished he didn't say anything for a while, until I asked, "Well?"

He shook his head slowly. "Ed, it's too damn much to digest all at once. I agree with you that there's something screwy in the state of Denmark, but I think we ought to sleep on it. We haven't too long to sleep anyway—or I haven't. You might as well stay home another day."

"I'll come to the office with you tomorrow," I told him. "A day or so isn't going to make any difference with the rib. The doc said the pain from the rib will taper off slowly, maybe over a month. It's not going to last a few days and then suddenly quit."

"So take off a month, if you want."

"No," I said. "It'd worry Mrs. Brady, for one thing. And for another, I want to listen in when you phone Dolan at ten."

"Okay. I'll set the alarm for eight. That'll give us almost six hours."

He set it and turned out the light.

I was tired but I didn't go to sleep right away. Mostly I was thinking about Angela—and wondering why I hadn't even mentioned the possibility of seeing her again. I knew part of the answer: I'd been fishing, in a way, when I'd asked her, just before dropping her off, whether she was going to tell her father that we'd seen one another. She'd said no, and the reason she'd given—that she didn't want her father to know she'd been so worried about Mike—had sounded pretty thin. More likely she knew that he wouldn't approve of her having dates with someone so far below her—financially, at least.

Or maybe she herself thought she'd been slumming, although she hadn't acted like it.

Anyway, it had been fun while it lasted, and as sweet as it had been unexpected.

The alarm clock seemed to go off the moment I closed my eyes, but it really was eight o'clock and bright daylight.

While we were getting dressed I remembered about the gun.

I said, "Uncle Am, what about the gun? I think Angela had holes in her head to think Mike might try for it again, but—"

"So take it anyway. You told her you would and what's to lose? We can bring it back later, when the dust has settled."

So I stuck it in my pocket when we left. We had a quick breakfast around

the corner and then got the Buick out of the garage and drove it to the office building's parking lot.

We went up to the Hunter & Hunter offices, both of them, and let ourselves in. Uncle Am walked on through the inner office, which is his. "Well, kid," he said from the doorway. "It's forty-five minutes before I'm supposed to phone Dolan. Want to kill it with some gin rummy?"

I'd gone to my desk and looked on it to see if any mail had come yesterday. When I'm away, or out working, Uncle Am always leaves routine mail there for me to take care of.

There were three envelopes there, all unopened because Uncle Am could tell from the outside what was inside, just as I could now. One was a bill from our stationer; it would be for some letterheads and envelopes we'd got last week. Another was a telephone bill, and the third was from Dorchester Finance and would be, I knew, a check to pay for a small bill I'd sent them for a day's work on a skip-trace job. The check would pay the two bills, and there'd be a little, if not much, left over. Another day, another dollar.

I told Uncle Am, "Let me make out checks for these bills first, and get the Dorchester check ready for deposit. Then if there's still time, I'll play you a game."

I did those little things and the phone rang just as I was finishing them. I picked up the receiver and said, "Ed Hunter speaking."

"Ed, this is Molly Czerwinski. Do you remember me?"

"Sure, Molly," I said. "Just a moment." And I put my hand over the mouthpiece and called out, "Don't hang up, Uncle Am. This must be business—I haven't seen the girl for eight years and knew her only slightly then."

I knew Uncle Am would have picked up his phone when I picked up mine. We always do it that way when we're both in the office and both free. If it is a personal call for one of us, the other hangs up. If it's business, he keeps on listening, which saves explaining later.

He called out, "Okay, Ed."

I took my hand off the mouthpiece. "Sure I remember you, Molly," I said. "You were one year behind me in high school, but we were in one class together, my last year. American History. You sat across the aisle from me."

She laughed a little. "Perfect memory."

"And what have you been doing since?"

"Right now, giving dancing lessons. But I'm not calling to solicit pupils. Ed, last night I ran into someone we both knew—Anson Howard; he's a policeman now—and he told me you're a private detective, so I looked you up in the yellow pages. Hunter & Hunter—are you in business with your father?"

"No, with my uncle. What else have you been doing besides giving dancing lessons?"

"Well—I got married, for one thing."

"Congratulations."

She laughed again. "And divorced, three years ago. Ed, this is business.

What kind of rates does a detective agency charge?"

I said, "Depends a lot on the kind of work, Molly. Can you tell me that over the phone?"

"I want you to find someone. My ex-husband, to be exact. He owes me money—but not so much that I can spend a *lot* of money, even if I had a lot of it, to get what he owes me."

"Back alimony?"

"Oh, no. I didn't ask for any. But I suppose you could call it a property settlement. We were paying for a house we'd bought out north of Howard Avenue. When we were divorced, he agreed to give me half of whatever our equity in it would bring—which was fair, because I was working too and part of the payments were my money. But the house was in his name so he was going to go ahead and sell it and then split with me. He sold it all right, but I never saw him again, or my share of the money."

"How much is involved?"

"We'd paid in almost five thousand, but he sold our equity for four, I learned. So he owes me two thousand, a little more if you figure three years' interest."

"Molly, you shouldn't have to hire a detective agency at all. The police should do it for you, for free."

"Oh, I went to them. And they did work on it—but not very hard, I guess. I mean, it wasn't a big case for them. And I went to them again yesterday because a friend of mine said she'd seen him in town, right in the Loop. I'd assumed he'd left town with the money—and maybe he did, but if he did he's back now. At least my friend was sure it was him.

"The police were nice to me, but—well, they're not really going to throw out a dragnet for him or anything. So they probably won't find him."

"Probably not—unless he gets picked up for something else, and gives his right name."

"About rates, Ed. I've got a little money. Do you think that for a hundred dollars—or two hundred at the outside—you'd have a good chance of finding him? I'll gamble that much on the chance of getting my two thousand."

"Molly," I said, "it would all depend on how much you can tell us about him, what leads you can give us to work on. His occupation, names of friends he might still be in touch with, places he might go—lots of things. But don't try it over the telephone; it'd take too long.

"Why don't you come in and talk to us? When I've pumped you dry of everything you can tell us that might help, then I'll lay it on the line for you—tell you honestly whether our chances of finding him are good enough to let you spend a hundred or two hundred letting us try. And win or lose, there's no charge for the interview. Fair enough?"

"Very fair. But—do you think a few days or a week will matter?"

"Not if he's back in Chicago for keeps. And if he was here for a quickie, we probably wouldn't find him anyway. But why?"

"I'm going to visit my parents—they live in Indianapolis now—and I'm leaving this afternoon. I *could* get to your office first, but I've got a lot of things to do and it would rush me. I wanted to talk to you before I left so I could find out whether it was important to see you right away. But it *would* rush me to try to do it today."

"Right," I said. "When we do talk, it should be at leisure. Besides, if we do take the case to work on, it would be better to have you in town, available while we're working."

"Thanks a lot, Ed. I'll call you whenever I get back then. Good-by."

As I hung up I heard Uncle Am's swivel chair squeak and then he was in the doorway. He leaned against one side of it.

"Sounds like a nice gal. Pretty?"

I nodded. "And I seem to remember that she had the best little derriere in American History. American History class, I mean."

He cocked an eye at me and I said, "No, I never tried to do more than look. She was going steady with the first-string fullback. I think they were engaged. I wonder if—No."

"No what?"

"I was going to wonder if he was the one she married. But if he was, she'd have figured I'd remember his name at least as well as hers and mentioned it. So it had to be someone she met after high school days."

I looked at my wrist watch. "Well, I got those checks ready to mail but it's too near ten now to bother starting a gin game if you're calling Dolan at ten."

"Okay, I'll call on the dot. You can pick your receiver up when you hear me dialing."

"Will do. You talk first and make your report. But before you let him hang up, say I want to ask him something and that you'll put me on the line."

But Uncle Am didn't call Dolan at ten on the dot because at one minute before ten our phone rang. I picked mine up and said, "Hunter & Hunter." Sometimes I answer the phone that way and sometimes with my own name. It lends not much variety, but some.

"*Ed Hunter?*" the phone asked me.

My ego suddenly grew a foot. Angela *was* calling me again, and already!

I said, "Who put the broken glass in Mrs. Murphy's sassafras?"

"*What?*"

My first reaction was to think she was kidding me by repeating exactly her reaction to the first Mrs. Murphy on the phone last night. But then a horrible suspicion hit me; voices aren't all that positively identifiable, from only a couple of words. Maybe this *wasn't* Angela.

So I repeated exactly what I'd said in answer to last night's "*What?*"

"Sorry," I said. "I thought this was a call I was expecting. Ed Hunter speaking."

"This is Mrs. Vincent Dolan speaking, Mr. Hunter. I've heard about the tremendous favor you did us last night, bringing Michael home instead of

taking him to the police, as most people would have. I want to thank you.”

It’s always hard to figure what to say when people thank you for something fairly important to them; you can’t thank them for thanking *you*, and *you’re welcome* or *don’t mention it* sounds silly. *It was a pleasure* would have been even worse in this particular case.

“How is Michael, Mrs. Dolan?”

“Feeling fine. He went to school, as usual. Mr. Hunter, I wonder if you’d do me another tremendous favor. I’d like to talk to you, in person, about—about that experience. Could you possibly come out here, some time today? I’ll gladly pay you for your time, if you can.”

I took a deep breath to give me time to think and then I said, “I don’t know for sure, Mrs. Dolan. There is—well, I’m waiting for another call that might send me out on a job that would have to be done right away. May I call you back within half an hour?”

“That will be fine, Mr. Hunter. I’ll be here all day. I’ll give you the number.”

I wrote down the number to save having to look it up. The number Uncle Am had would be a different one, the private unlisted phone in Dolan’s study. I went to the doorway this time and looked in at Uncle Am.

I said, “Don’t dial Dolan just yet. I want to think a minute first.”

“About what? From that Mrs. Murphy bit, I gather you thought it was Angela’s voice. Right?”

“Right,” I said gloomily. “And it’s the last time I ever pull something like that unless I’m *sure* who I’m talking to. But that isn’t what I want to think about. I’m going to have to drop this in Dolan’s lap, tell him she called and what she wants. There isn’t any out from that; I can’t just go out there without his knowing.”

“Not if he’s going to be home anyway. But taking his daughter out without his knowing didn’t seem to worry you. Are wives any different?”

“No, but the situation is. Just give me a minute to figure out how to put it to him so he doesn’t tell me *not* to see her. If he does that, how can I explain it to her when I call back? Oh, I can explain why I can’t do it *today*. But not why I’m refusing down the line.”

“Just point that out to Dolan, if he gives you the wrong answer. Isn’t that simple?”

“I guess it is. All right, go ahead and call him.”

He gave me time to get back to my desk and get set there, and then he dialed.

Chapter Six

The phone was picked up after the first ring. “Dolan,” a voice said. Just *Dolan*, not *Vincent* Dolan, but that made sense. The only other male Dolan, Mike, would hardly be answering the private phone in his father’s study, even if he weren’t at school.

Uncle Am said, “This is Ambrose Hunter, Mr. Dolan—”

Which was as far as he got before Dolan cut in quickly. “I’m sorry—I’m busy right now, Mr. Armstrong. May I call you back in ten or fifteen minutes?”

Uncle Am said, “Sure. I understand, Mr. Dolan.”

He hung up and so did I, and I strolled to the doorway between the offices, and again took a turn at holding up one side of it.

I said, “Someone was with him, someone he didn’t want to use your right name in front of.”

Uncle Am looked at me. “Kid, don’t waste your brain power deducing the obvious.”

“I was stating the obvious to get it out of the way so I could start wondering who it was.”

Uncle Am shrugged. “Anybody who might make a connection with the name Hunter. Which, by now, could be anyone connected with the household, even like George Steck, or one of the servants. Maybe he’ll tell us. Come to think of it, he probably will, to explain the Armstrong business.”

“Probably. Of course if he had anybody at all with him, he wouldn’t want to talk to you about your shadowing his wife. Or even listen to your report on it.”

I turned to go back to my desk, and the mailman came in. I traded him the two pieces of outgoing mail for two pieces of incoming. They were neither checks nor bills this time. Just one piece of junk mail and a letter from a friend of ours with a carnival, a mentalist. I saw it was postmarked from Indianapolis, which made me think of Molly Czerwinski again, for no reason except geographical coincidence; that’s where she was going to visit her parents.

Uncle Am had been a carney for quite a few years, and I was with him for a couple of seasons before we quit it and became private detectives. He has a lot of carney and ex-carney friends, and I have a few. Carey Stofft, the one who’d written this particular letter, was a friend of ours and I knew the letter was really to both of us, but it was addressed to Uncle Am, so I took it to him

to let him open it and read it first.

He looked up, pleased, when he was only halfway down the first page. "Good news, Ed. His outfit's playing Gary next week, all week. Wants both of us to come down and see him, overnight or the whole damn week. He's got a trailer now instead of living in the mitt camp, and says he can put us up.

"We'll see how business is next week. Maybe we can both take off a few days at the same time for once."

He went back to reading and handed me the first page when he'd finished it. But before I could start it the phone rang, so I put it down and went back to my phone.

It was Dolan. "Dolan, Mr. Hunter," he was saying to Uncle Am. "Sorry I had to cut you off before, but my wife had just come in here to tell me something, and I couldn't even call you by your right name in front of her."

Uncle Am said, "I figured that, Mr. Dolan. That is, that it was some member of your household."

"She came to tell me she'd just talked to your nephew, Ed, and had asked him to come out and tell her about last night, about Mike."

"Yes. Ed's here and wants to talk to you when I'm through."

Uncle Am had his notes in front of him and gave Dolan the story just as he'd told it to me last night, except with more exact times, details, and descriptions.

When he finished, he asked, "Shall I follow through on the license number of that Chevrolet convertible, Mr. Dolan, and see who owns it?"

"No, I know—I mean I recognize the woman from your description of her. Faye Greenough. Friend of Sylvia's from way back when—she and Sylvia were both working at the same place when I first met Sylvia. Faye and I don't get along too well, and she never comes here for that reason, but I've no objection if Sylvia sees her occasionally. As long as it's for nothing more dastardly than dinner and a movie."

"Okay, Mr. Dolan. Shall we finish talking about the surveillance before I put Ed on? Do you want us to continue?"

"For a while, I guess. If every time she goes out is like that then I've been making something out of nothing—and I hope I have been. But now that I've started, I might as well keep you on the job for at least a few more occasions."

"Fine, and I'll arrange to use an outside operative next time. But about today—she told Ed she'd be home all day today. Would she have meant this evening too?"

"Probably. We'll skip today. Tell you what, she usually mentions something about it at breakfast when she's decided to go out for the day. Next time that happens I'll call you right away. If you can get a man and have him ready to pick her up by the time she leaves, that'll be fine. If he misses her, he misses her, and better luck next time."

"Fine. How much notice did you have yesterday?"

"None at all, yesterday. She didn't make up her mind to go out until after

lunch. But when she did, I overheard her phone her hairdresser and make that appointment. That's how I was able to tell you when and where to pick her up—and it was one of the reasons I made up my mind suddenly that it would be a good time to start. Ordinarily she doesn't tell me where she's going, and I don't ask."

"Right. And if we get a break like that again next time, maybe I can handle the job myself once more. The one thing I can't do—and even more especially Ed can't—is hang around your neighborhood waiting for her to come out. We're both too well known around there for that."

"I understand. Now do you want to put your nephew on the phone?"

I waited a reasonable number of seconds and then said, "Ed speaking, Mr. Dolan."

"Hello, Ed. I gather that you heard enough of your uncle's end of the conversation to know that I know my wife phoned you?"

"Right. And I told her I'd call back within half an hour, because I wanted to check with you first. Is there any reason why I shouldn't? The way she put it is going to make it awfully hard for me to say no."

"I—guess there isn't any reason." He chuckled dryly. "I gather you won't talk about the—uh—surveillance bit. Did she ask you to come out at any specific time today?"

"No, she just said she'd be home all day. Which leads me to this, Mr. Dolan: Could I have a short talk with you while I'm there, since I'm coming anyway? I was going to ask you that anyway, even if your wife hadn't called me."

"I'm going out for a while now—probably have lunch while I'm out—but I'll be home by two o'clock. Any time after that."

"Fine. I'll see if two o'clock is convenient for her. Then you'll be home by the time she and I have finished talking. Uh—but what if she wants to show me to the door herself?"

"No problem. Tell her I phoned after she did and that you have an appointment with me at two-thirty—or any time after two when she's through with you. I'll have given her a story as to why I want to see you."

"Good. One more point, a trifling one. She said she'd pay for my time for coming out. How do I handle it if she insists?"

He laughed. "Ed, money is never a trifling point. But if she tries to pay you, just tell her that you're already being paid, by me. And you are. Add your time for today to the agency bill for the other job. I'd tell you to add another day for what you did last night—except that would be too damn little. There are some things that can't be paid for in money. Well—we'll be talking later. Is there anything else you want to ask me *before* you talk to Sylvia?"

"Just—if you have any suggestions as to how I should handle the interview?"

"Oh, glad you asked. Just this, don't frighten her any more than she's already frightened. Stick to the facts, but play them down instead of up. If you

have any grizzly or gruesome doubts—about Mike’s sanity, or about whether he could actually have heard a conversation instead of imagining or dreaming it—save them for me.”

“I understand, Mr. Dolan. I’ll see you then.”

When we hung up Uncle Am came out and dropped into one of the two extra chairs in the outer office.

“Dolan sounds pretty sold on you, kid,” Uncle Am said. “You must have made a real solid impression on him last night.”

It wasn’t a question so I didn’t answer it.

He took time out to light a cigarette. “And on Angela. Now if you can sell yourself to Sylvia Dolan you’ll be a real friend of the family, won’t you?”

“Why the needle, Uncle Am? Can I help it if I’m lovable?”

“Except maybe Mike. Do you think he likes you too?”

He was still needling, but I decided to give it a straight answer, as well as I could. I said, “Once he gave up, realized I was going to his father no matter what, he was friendly enough. I didn’t have to drag him home. He doesn’t know me well enough to love me, but I don’t think he’s holding any grudge.”

“Well, now Angela’s called you, Sylvia’s called you—”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I’ve still got to call Mrs. Dolan back and set that date for two o’clock. Keep your needle sterile till I do that.”

I pulled over the phone and dialed the number she’d given me. She answered the phone herself and agreed to meet me at two o’clock.

And that was that and I turned back to Uncle Am.

He said, “Last night we decided to sleep on this before we talked it over between us. But from the fact that you want another talk with Dolan, I gather you’ve had some ideas. What questions do you want to ask him?”

I said, “I’m not sure myself, after the first one. Which is what came out in whatever conversation he had with Mike this morning. What else I ask him will depend more or less on how he answers that one.”

“I guess the focal point of the screwiness is the fact that the boy didn’t go to his father to warn him about that conspiracy, instead of trying to get a gun. That coupled with the fact that you have it on Angela’s word that he loves and respects his father.”

“More than Angela’s word,” I said. “I could *feel* a closeness between them. I was there. Say—”

“Say what?”

“This isn’t my day for thinking, or I’d have thought of this sooner. What do I do or say if Mrs. Dolan recognizes me from the glimpse she got of me when she came home while I was picking up Angela at ten-forty? She didn’t really *look* at me, but she walked right past me. And I promised Angela—”

“Why not phone Angela and put it up to her?”

“How could I be sure only Angela was listening in? There may be half a dozen extensions on that Dolan phone.”

“I can handle that, Ed. You dial the general Dolan number and then just

listen in. I'll do all the talking."

He went into the inner office and I gave him time to sit down and then dialed the number and listened.

A high-pitched male voice answered after a few rings. "Dolan residence." There was a strong accent, even on those two words, but I won't try to reproduce it. I guessed it must be the voice of Robert, the Filipino houseboy.

"Is Miss Angela Dolan there?" Uncle Am asked.

"Yes, sir. I call her."

There was about a minute's wait and then Angela's voice. It did sound like her stepmother's, but it said, "Angela Dolan speaking."

"Miss Dolan? Please don't mention my name over the phone. You'll learn why shortly. I—"

"But I don't *know* your name. Or I don't recognize your voice."

"You met my nephew last night for the first time. He wants to talk to you about a personal matter and we understand there are extension phones in your home. So would you do him the favor of calling him from another phone? The nearest pay station—or your father's private phone, if he's out and you have access to it?"

"All right. Dad just left and I don't think he locked his study. I'll call back in a minute. Or five minutes if I have to go out to make the call."

She hung up and we did too. Uncle Am called out, "I won't bother to listen in on this, Ed. You take it from here."

Chapter Seven

When Angela called I told her about her stepmother's call and the problem it gave me.

"I see, Ed. No real problem. If she does recognize and remember you and say, 'Aren't you the young man I saw calling for Angela last night?' just admit you were. And tell the truth—up to a point, if you know what I mean. That I called you last night for the same reason she called you today. And that we had a few drinks and talked a while—same kind of conversation you'll be having with her."

"Fine. Anybody know how late you got home, though?"

"No. So the time element won't even have to be mentioned. And if she should happen to bring it up later in front of Dad, that's okay. I'll just 'fess up that I did call you and see you."

"Good. But in case he should ever say anything to me about it let's have our stories straight. Where did we go for those drinks and when did I bring you home?"

"Same place we really did go. You don't remember exactly when you drove me home except that it was late. We won't get crossed up if neither of us is specific about the time; we just didn't notice. Is anyone listening in on your end of this conversation?"

"No," I said.

"Then I want to tell you, Ed, that I—Oh, I don't know how to say it."

"Is it about last night?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Let me try to help. You're afraid that, because you were honest and direct, I'm going to assume that your heels are round? When, under normal circumstances, they're no rounder than the heels of any beautiful girl *should* be, to fit the rest of her?"

"Ed!" There was almost a catch in her voice. "How could you have guessed so *exactly* what I wanted to say—and how could you have said it so much better, so much more directly too, than I could have figured how to say it?"

"It didn't need saying," I said. And then it occurred to me that, now she'd brought up the subject of our relationship, it was time to ask the question I hadn't asked last night. So I went on, "May I see you again sometime soon?"

"Ed, I—I just don't know how to answer that. Will you give me a little time to think about it?"

“Sure,” I said. “‘Don’t call me; I’ll call you.’ Is that it?”

“Ed, of course not. It’s *un*understanding of you to put it that way. It’s just that—right now I’m mixed up about a lot of things. Give me a while to sort myself out. Then, if you still want to, call me. And I’ll say yes or no, not maybe.”

“Fine,” I said. “But when I do call, keep in mind I’m not necessarily suggesting a repeat of last night. Just asking for a date.”

“Thank you, Ed. I’ll promise you a definite answer if you call not sooner than a week from now.”

“When I do call, shall I use the same system I did this time—have someone else call and give a message for you to call back from a line without extension phones?”

“No.” She was definite, emphatic. “If we see one another again it will be openly, Ed. If anyone’s listening in—and there isn’t much chance of it; we don’t spy on one another—it won’t matter.”

“Okay. Will you be there when I call this afternoon?”

“I’m afraid not. I’m taking a couple of afternoon classes at the University of Chicago, two days a week from two to four, and this is one of my days for them.”

“A week from today, then. ‘Bye, Angela.”

She said, “Good-by, Ed,” and we both hung up. I heard Uncle Am’s swivel chair and then a few of his footsteps, and he stopped in the doorway and leaned against one side of it, looking at me.

“I wasn’t listening in,” he said, “but I couldn’t help overhearing parts of your end of it. Kid, are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

I knew what he meant. He wasn’t criticizing my morals or trying to interfere in my life. He knows my weakness for women and puts up with it just as I put up with his weakness for gambling. He even knows that someday, if and when I ever find the woman that’s really right for me, I may marry her if she’ll have me, and he’s reconciled to that.

He wasn’t worried about my relationship, past or future, to Angela *as* Angela. But he was worried about my relationship, future, to Vincent Dolan’s only and beloved daughter, and I saw his point.

It was something I’d been trying *not* to see, myself. Vincent Dolan was a rich man who’d be wanting the best possible catch for his daughter, and an impecunious private detective who couldn’t keep her in cosmetics wasn’t a likely candidate. And even less than he’d want me for a son-in-law would he want me trying to seduce his daughter without thought of marriage. For all I knew he might think her still a virgin.

But—well, yes, that part of it I’d let cross my mind, but my mind had given me back an answer. Vincent Dolan liked me personally. If he found me seeing his daughter frequently, he might warn me off, but he wouldn’t be having me worked over, let alone put out a contract against me, *without* warning me off. And I’d figure him to be within his rights in warning me off

unless, by then, I'd decided my intentions toward Angela were honorable and serious.

And maybe, too, he didn't give a damn. Figured she was grown up and it was her business who she went out with. An encouraging sign in that direction had been—

"There's one thing," I said, "that you couldn't have guessed from my end of the conversation. I asked her if I should use the same system on my next call as I did on this one. Her answer was a definite no. If we see one another again, it'll be openly. Obviously she knows her father's attitude toward her better than we do, and doesn't think he'd object."

He nodded slowly. "That does make a difference. Well, now that today you've talked to all members of the Dolan family—except Mike—how about a game of gin rummy?"

"Okay," I said. He turned to go back into his office and I started to get up, but just then the phone rang. So I sat back down and waited until I heard his swivel chair before I picked up my phone. It was Uncle Am's turn to answer. He said, "Hunter & Hunter."

"Am? Harry Cogswell of Phoenix Indemnity. Is either you or Ed free for a one-day job, starting immediately?"

"I am," Uncle Am said. "Ed's got an appointment this afternoon."

"Fine. Listen."

I could have hung up, since whatever it was, I wouldn't be working on it, but there was nothing else I could be doing anyway, so I kept the receiver to my ear.

It was a fairly routine tail job. Phoenix was carrying the bond, a big one, on a bank cashier named Pritchard, address so-and-so, description such-and-such. He was one of several employees of the bank who worked Saturdays, with the bank closed, to do certain types of work that couldn't be done on days while the bank was operating; he had a weekday off to make up for it and today, Wednesday, was his day off.

Someone had reported to them seeing him at the race track a week ago today, his previous weekday off. Bonding companies do not like the thought of their bondees gambling; gambling is the cause of more embezzlements than any other one thing. If a bondee is found to be gambling *heavily*, his bond is canceled even if his accounts are found to be in perfect shape; sooner or later it's too likely that he'll find himself in over his ears and "borrow" money to try to get back even. With full intention of putting it back, of course, if he wins—but he never does.

Cogswell wanted Am to get out to the address right away, in a car, and tail Pritchard when and if he left home, see whether or not he went to the race track again. If he did, and if Am managed not to lose him in the parking area or could find him again inside, Am was to see whether he was hitting the two-dollar windows or the hundred-dollar ones. If the latter, his bond would be canceled immediately.

“Better get on it right away, Am,” Cogswell said. “It’ll be close to noon—after eleven, anyway—by the time you get out there. And he might leave around noon to have lunch out somewhere and then go to the track. He could do that easily because he’s a bachelor, lives with his brother and his brother’s wife. Any questions?”

“Any chance the brother’s description is close enough that I might follow the brother instead if he’s home and leaves first?”

Cogswell laughed heartily. “Not likely, Am. We don’t have the brother’s description but our records show his occupation—an assistant coach for the Chicago Bears. That means he’s an ex-football player himself and of at least normal dimensions. Our Joseph Pritchard is a shrimp. Five-six, hundred twenty-five pounds. They don’t hire ‘em that size to coach the Bears.”

“Right. Only how come you waited so long to call, Harry? It’s a full day whether I start now or started at nine, and what made you wait till now to call?”

“Swenson was going to handle it, but when he was getting ready to leave half an hour ago, something else came up that I put him on instead, and started to call you guys. Your phone has sure been tied up. I’ve tried every five minutes for half an hour.”

“Guess our phone *was* pretty busy. Well, thanks for holding out till you did get us. I’m on my way.”

That’s the way we get a lot of our business; outfits like Phoenix Indemnity are big enough to have one or several investigators on their own—one in Phoenix’s case—but whenever things pile up on them and they have more things to be done, and done right away, than their staff investigators can handle, they farm some of it out to private agencies. We always try our best to keep them happy, so they’ll keep calling us. Phoenix and a few other bonding, finance, and loan companies each give us an average of a day’s work a week for each of us, and it’s the backbone of our business.

Uncle Am came out of his office putting on his hat. “Kid, why don’t you knock off till time for you to go to the Dolans’? If another job did come in, you wouldn’t be able to take it.”

“Not if it was something rush that had to be done today, no. But neither of us has anything lined up for tomorrow. And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. We just might take in a job that didn’t have to be right away or not at all.”

“Okay, make like an eager beaver if you want. See you this evening.”

He left, and I made like an eager beaver by pulling a paperback novel from a supply I keep in a drawer of my desk, deciding to read until the phone rang.

The phone didn’t ring, and at half-past twelve I decided I might as well leave for lunch.

I timed it nicely. It was two o’clock almost on the head when I mounted the three front steps and rang the Dolan bell.

After a minute the door was opened by a colored maid—who would be the

Elsie that Angela had mentioned. I gave her my name and told her Mrs. Dolan was expecting me.

She led me to a big double doorway through which I entered a beautifully furnished living room.

“Miz Dolan, this Mr. Hunter.”

Mrs. Dolan put down a magazine and looked up from where she was sitting on a sofa halfway across the big room. She wore a dark purple housecoat and looked fresh and even younger than I knew her to be or than she’d seemed on our quick encounter last night. There was a full drink on the coffee table in front of her, but from all I could tell, it could have been her first of the day.

She said, “Thanks, Elsie,” to dismiss the girl and then, to me, “Before you sit down, Mr. Hunter, there’s a bar in the corner behind you. I hope you’ll help yourself and join me in a drink.”

I started to say no thanks and then changed it to thank you and went to the little bar she’d indicated by nodding toward it. I had no yen for a drink but one drink wouldn’t hurt me, especially on top of a big lunch, and I had suddenly remembered something. An alcoholic—or almost anyone who drinks more than very moderately, whether he’s a lush or not—is always more friendly toward and more willing to talk freely to or with someone he’s having drink with than someone who refuses to drink with him—especially if he feels guilty about his own drinking; then he resents anyone who won’t drink with him or even anyone who doesn’t drink, period.

So I thanked her and went to the little—but well-stocked—bar in the corner and made myself a highball. I placed the glass and myself so she couldn’t see how little whiskey I poured, and to make it look strong I used ginger ale instead of soda, a trick Uncle Am had taught me once; ginger ale is dark enough to make a weak drink look like a strong one.

I carried it over and she motioned me to sit down across from her, the coffee table between us. She picked up her drink as I sat down. “Thank you much for coming, Mr. Hunter. And for what you did for us, for the Dolans, last night.”

I said, “Don’t mention it, Mrs. Dolan. And if you don’t mind, please call me Ed. Being called Mr. Hunter always makes me feel ridiculous.”

“All right, Ed. Haven’t I seen you somewhere? Oh, of course. You live only a block from here; I must have seen you dozens of times. Well...” She paused and in that pause I lost my chance to tell her she’d seen me with Angela only last night. “Do you want to tell me in your own way just what happened?”

So I told it just as it happened; I put in all the facts and didn’t skip anything, but I tried to play it down, to tell it as unalarmingly as I could.

She sat listening intently, but with a sort of, well, *masked* expression. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. But she didn’t interrupt once, or touch her drink while I was doing my best to make it sound like an ordinary prank for a

youngster Mike's age—nothing that a lecture or a spanking wouldn't take care of. I tried to give the impression that it was nothing to worry about.

It seemed to work, because when I finished there weren't any questions. She said, "Thanks, Ed. My husband and Angela—that's my daughter—"

I cut in quickly, "I met her last night." Which, of course, I had, when Dolan had sent for her to take Mike upstairs to bed.

She nodded. "I thought maybe they were keeping something back from me. It seemed such a *strange* thing for Mike, of all people, to have done. He's never done anything really bad before..."

"And probably won't again," I said reassuringly.

"I hope not. But—one reason I wanted to talk to you personally—Vincent asked both me and Angie not to bring it up with Mike again. He said he wanted to talk to Mike about it himself and that it was better if only *one* person did, that if all three of us started heckling him on it, he'd feel picked on and go on the defensive."

"Sounds sensible to me," I said.

"We both promised not to mention it to him. And that's why I wanted so badly to talk to you about it. I probably wouldn't have bothered you if I could have talked directly to Mike and heard it from him."

"It was no bother," I told her. "It's been a pleasure."

I took a quick glance at my wrist watch and she caught me at it. "You've got fifteen minutes, Ed. Vincent told me before he left this morning that he'd arranged to talk to you, too, at half-past two. He says I'm to keep you entertained till he gets home. How shall I entertain you, Ed?"

It could have been a crack, but it wasn't.

I said, "I found Mike an interesting boy, Mrs. Dolan. How about telling me about him?"

Dolan was about ten minutes late getting home but it didn't matter; I'd pushed the right button. With only one short interruption when she asked me to replenish her drink and freshen my own, she needed no prompting to keep talking. And because I was interested I listened carefully—and learned nothing at all, except that from everything she told me, Mike Dolan was just about the least likely candidate of his age in all of Chicago to turn suddenly into a one-boy crime wave.

And that was something I'd been suspecting all along.

Chapter Eight

Dolan, when he came, surprised me a little bit by not taking me to his study right away. He took his wife's glass and mine, without asking either of us, and made us fresh drinks and one for himself.

He sat beside her on the sofa and she picked up the ball again and ran with it. "Vincent, I was just telling Ed about the time that Mike..." And for almost an hour, with her doing most of the talking, Dolan interpolating an occasional remark or a brief anecdote of his own, I had to open my mouth only to take an occasional sip of my highball. Still no pay dirt, though.

I got the feeling that I'd known Mike ever since he was born.

Up to last night, that is.

Dolan broke it up, and suddenly, after a glance at his watch. Mike would be coming home from school any moment, he explained, and he'd just as soon Mike didn't know I was here; if he found me here he'd think it was because his story wasn't believed and was still being investigated. Until he'd decided just how things were to be handled with Mike and he'd had his talk with him, he didn't want Mike to think that.

So he and I excused ourselves and went to his study or office and he closed the door. He didn't lock it, but explained that no one, not even a member of the family, ever came through that door without knocking.

We made ourselves comfortable; he offered to have Robert bring me another drink, but when I declined he seemed pleased and didn't order one for himself.

He said, "Well, Ed, I gathered from our talk on the phone this morning that you've still got some questions you want to ask me. Want to go ahead? Or shall I bring you up to date first?"

"Go ahead," I said. "Whatever you've got to say may answer some or even all of my questions before I ask them."

"All right. First, in case you're wondering what Sylvia thinks we're talking about privately, it isn't Mike at all. For me to want to talk more to you about him, and not in front of her, would spoil our little conspiracy to reassure her and keep her from worrying. You must have done a good job on that, since she didn't even mention last night after I came."

"Okay," I said. "But what *are* we talking about? Probably your wife will never get in touch with me again, but if she should, I should know."

"Another case or cases I'm supposed to be giving you to handle. When Sylvia and I talked this morning—after each of us had talked to you on the

phone—she said she'd offered to pay for your time for coming around, and also suggested I give you some kind of a reward for what you did last night.

"I told her to forget it, that I'd take care of it. That you probably wouldn't take a reward anyway, and that I'd take care of it by giving some business to your agency. I told her that from time to time we suspected one or another bookie of holding out bets or dragging down, and that we sometimes used private detectives to investigate them. Of course that's not true. We have our own methods of checking up on such cases. But she doesn't know that and thinks I'm giving you some new business right now."

I nodded.

Dolan said, "Now about Mike. I did a lot of thinking about it last night and today both, and I'm more worried than I was originally. So much so that I decided maybe I'm not competent to handle it. I decided to take him to a child psychologist.

"So instead of having a long talk with him before breakfast this morning as I'd planned, I had a short one. And I weasled a bit; I didn't even mention the gun. I pretended to be worried more about whether he'd really heard that conversation or had dreamed it. I said I'd like to have him tell his story to an expert on such things. I figured he'd be more cooperative in talking freely to one if I let him think that was the point in question."

I said, "I think you're a psychologist yourself, Mr. Dolan."

"I've read quite a bit on it. But not on child psychology—and Mike's actions last night have me stumped. Anyway, right after breakfast I got Angela in here and told her I wanted her to use the phone to find me the best child psychologist in Chicago. She's taking courses at the University of Chicago and I figured she could find out what I wanted to know through some connection or other. She made a few calls and got the name I wanted.

"A Dr. Walter Werther. He's world-famous. I recognized the name myself; I just didn't know that he lived in Chicago so hadn't thought of looking for him in the phone book. I chased Angela out and called him—was lucky to get him just as he got there and before his first patient arrived, so I didn't have to fight a secretary to get to talk to him personally.

"And even more luckily, in a way, *he* recognized *my* name." Dolan chuckled. "Maybe he's a horse player or maybe he's a reformer studying the setup here with an eye to putting me out of business. Doesn't matter which, so long as I got to talk to him.

"I told him just enough to get him curious, and then told him price was no object if he could talk to me—or listen to me—for half an hour today, and talk to Mike tomorrow. We swung it; he didn't have an open appointment today but we settled that with a lunch date. And he will see Mike tomorrow morning at eight-thirty, before his regular hours."

"Are you both—you and Mike I mean—going to talk to him?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Up to him. Said he'd start out by meeting Mike with me, might or might not send me on an errand, as it were, for a solo talk with Mike.

And if he thinks Mike needs continuing advice—God damn it, let's be honest: continuing therapy!—he'll tell me and we'll arrange things, after he's talked to Mike once."

He broke off and stared at me. Then: "And that's it, on this end. Now, Ed, what were the questions you wanted to ask me? Do you know anything I don't?"

I shook my head. I said, "Just something I've been wondering. Everyone, but everyone—starting with you when I brought Mike home last night—simply assumes that he dreamed that conversation or that he—well, let's say indulged in a flight of imagination.

"Have you even *considered* the possibility that he did hear such a conversation? Or—let's put it this way—some kind of a fragment of conversation that he could have misunderstood or misinterpreted to think that it concerned your death?"

Dolan nodded slowly. "Yes, I considered it. Not while I was talking to Mike last night—my main thought then was to reassure him—but afterward.

"Ed, there's simply no way it could have happened. There weren't any two men in this house at any time yesterday—besides myself—who could possibly have—"

I cut in on him. "Were there any two men who *couldn't* possibly?"

He laughed a short barking laugh. "George Steck—you met him last night—was here from, oh, maybe two to half-past. Call him a possibility, if you want. But the only two other possibles would be me—and, damn it, I didn't—and Robert Sideco. And have you ever heard Robert's voice?"

"A few words once," I said.

"High-pitched, higher than the voices of most women. And with an accent you can cut with a machete. It's such a characteristic voice and accent that Mike couldn't have possibly not recognized it from a single phrase."

"George Steck's voice? All I heard him say last night was a few words. And I wasn't listening for intonation or accent."

Dolan shrugged. "A voice like any voice. A little lower in pitch than yours or mine, but I wouldn't know whether or not Mike would recognize it. But *Robert's*, yes. If he could mistake Robert's voice at any distance, I'd have him put in a school for retarded children."

"And you're sure no one—no men, that is—were in the house except yourself, Steck, Robert?"

"I talked to all the servants this morning—all three of them and one at a time. Yes, Ed, I thought of the possibility of his having overheard *a* conversation, like between two delivery men carrying in a piece of new furniture or a plumber and his helper coming in to fix something.

"No dice. Nobody, family or servant, had a guest here yesterday afternoon, and there were no service employees in any category. Nobody here but us chickens."

"Nobody has keys? No outsiders, I mean?"

“Nobody. Not even George lets himself in. Ed, take my word for it, I’ve thought of everything. Even the possibility that Mike heard a momentarily loud spot of radio or television conversation. There are several of each around, of course. But none near enough Mike’s room—except one *in* his room—for him to have overheard.

“Don’t think I haven’t been trying to think of angles, Ed. There’s not even an extension telephone near Mike’s room. There are three phones on this floor and one on the third that’s for the servants’ use. Nothing.”

I shook my head. “Guess I owe you an apology, Mr. Dolan, for underestimating the amount of thinking you’ve done about this.”

“If you come up with any other ideas, don’t hesitate to bring them to me. I’ll give you a ring tomorrow and tell you what Dr. Werther says after he talks to Mike, if you like.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I was going to ask if you’d do that. Oh, there’s one other question. Did you try to get him to repeat, literally, what he overheard—if it was a short conversation, or any part of it if it was a long one?”

“I brought it up but didn’t get any definite response the first time, and didn’t press. He’s going to be willing to talk more freely with the doctor if he hasn’t been badgered first.”

I stood up. “Thanks, Mr. Dolan. Call on us any time if—Oh, you didn’t mention Dr. Werther’s preliminary opinion based on what you told him. Did he take it seriously?”

“He did, Ed. To the extent of suggesting that, if he’s not convinced the story Mike tells him isn’t the truth—the truth to Mike, that is—or that Mike’s holding anything back, he’ll try hypnosis. Or even, if the boy resists being hypnotized, questioning him under narcosis. If I give permission, of course.”

“Would you?”

“I’ll consider it if he recommends it.”

Dolan stood too and started toward the door with me, then said, “Just a minute, Ed. Let me look out first. I’d just as soon Mike didn’t see you here today.”

So I waited till he got to the door first, opened it, and stepped out. A moment later he called back over his shoulder, “Coast is clear,” and I joined him.

He walked to the door with me and let me out.

Chapter Nine

I headed east on Huron Street, with a block to decide whether I turned in at the rooming house and stayed there, or went on back to the office. It was almost four o'clock and I'd have less than an hour at the office if I went there, so I decided it wasn't worth the trouble to reopen, and turned in.

Two men were at work recarpeting the stairs.

Upstairs, the phone in our room started ringing as I neared the door so I let myself in fast and got it in time.

Uncle Am's voice asked, "Who stood a rusty nail on Mrs. Murphy's bathroom scale?"

"Who put the rainbow trout up Mrs. Murphy's waterspout?" I asked him. And we agreed that neither of those was very spectacular and we'd call it a draw.

"Where are you?" I asked him. "And what gives?"

"At the office. Just got here. Thought I'd have time to write up my report this afternoon and not have it on my mind tomorrow. What's with you?"

"Just got *here*," I said. "Didn't get away from Dolan's till a few minutes ago and it didn't seem worth while to go down there for less than an hour. But did you lose the guy you were tailing, or what? I thought you'd stick with him longer than this otherwise."

"Tell you when I see you. Listen, I feel in the mood for a long ride somewhere. Would that conflict with any of your plans?"

"I haven't any plans for it to conflict with. How do we work the logistics? Shall I come there while you're writing up the report?"

"Hell, no. I've got the car. It'll take me half an hour, give or take a little, on the report. Pick you up between half-past four and five."

"Okay. I'll be outside."

"Swell. See you."

I went downstairs at half-past and a few minutes later the gray Buick came along and double-parked just long enough to let me get in.

“What happened, Uncle Am?” I asked, as soon as we were rolling again.

“Something pretty lousy, kid. I’d as soon have a drink while I tell it. How does Tom, Dick and Harry’s sound?” It sounded fine; it’s our favorite bar on the Near North Side. It’s a quiet place with no jukebox, no television set, no noise beyond enough of a hum of conversation to cover your own talking.

We put the car on the parking lot next door and went in. At five o’clock there was a wide choice of booths and we took our favorite, the one we always take when there’s a choice. We ordered drinks.

“You didn’t lose him,” I said. “It wouldn’t put you down this much if that’s all it was.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t lose him—but he’s lost. I knew him. Hell, you met him yourself, a time or two. I never knew his full last name, but we used to call him Pritch. And sometimes we’d call him Little Joe. But Joseph Pritchard didn’t register when I got it over the phone. And I didn’t know he was a bank cashier, so even the description didn’t register.”

“I think I remember him. Used to sit in on some of the poker games in the back room at Rabinov’s?”

“Yeah. Small games, never any big ones. The kind you lose or win twelve bucks over an evening. And I knew he used to play the ponies—there was a bookie that’d drop in there once or twice an evening to pick up bets. But Pritch bet for kicks—maybe one two-dollar bet an evening on the average. The way I gamble. But this afternoon—”

He broke off when our drinks came until the waitress left.

“This afternoon he dropped somewhere between a thousand bucks and fifteen hundred. In bets up to five hundred at a crack. And I had to turn him in. Damn it all. Just once in a while I hate this racket—but this is one of the once in a while, kid.”

“Turn him in how? Oh, you mean report to Phoenix Indemnity. Look, Uncle Am, why don’t you take it off the top, and get it off your mind? You just did your job, though.”

“Sure, but sometimes that hurts. A public executioner just does his job when he drops the trap door but it must be a stinking job for him when it turns out that he knows the man he’s executing, even slightly. Even if he knows the man is guilty.”

“Off the top,” I reminded him.

“All right. I staked myself out and about one o’clock he came out of the house—I recognized him right away—and drove off in an old Pontiac parked at the curb. I knew he’d know me by sight, too, although he didn’t—still doesn’t—know I’m a detective, so I gave him a fairly long tail and managed most of the time to keep at least one car between us.

“The first turn he made showed me he wasn’t heading for Arlington Park. South on Clark and then west on Division, and just past Halsted he slowed down and I guessed he was looking for a place to park. He found one and I got past him while he was engrossed in backing into it, so he didn’t see me.

"I had to go another half block to find one for myself, and when I got out of the car and looked back, I couldn't see him and thought I'd lost him. But I walked back that way slowly and when I was just about opposite his car he came out of a drugstore fifty yards away pulling the cellophane off a cigar, and walked away from me.

"I kept about that distance and another fifty yards on, halfway to the next corner, he turned into a doorway that was flush with the sidewalk. When I got there I found it was a doorway that led to some apartments upstairs over a hardware store. There were four mailboxes. The names on 'em didn't mean anything to me.

"I had to guess which direction he'd go when he came out and I figured the odds were it would be back toward his car, so I went on a couple of doors past the hardware store and started window shopping, with the corner of an eye on that doorway. In the next fifteen minutes five men went into that doorway; nobody came out of it. And from the looks of the men and the way they dressed I began to get a hunch—that there was some action going on upstairs in one of those apartments. I wasn't going to learn anything from outside. So —"

"But," I said, "by going up and showing yourself to him, you couldn't have followed him after that."

"That wasn't as important as knowing what he was doing up there. Anyway, I moved closer and started watching people coming both ways. If I saw someone I knew heading for the doorway and could stop him before he went in, I'd have it made.

"Fifteen minutes and five more guys, and then I hit the jackpot. Gus Mowson. Dunno if you know him or not; he's hung out at one or another of several joints I've gambled at. I gave him the glad hand, and the pitch that someone had told me there was some action up here but that damn it I'd forgotten the exact address on my way here and did he know—

"Of course he knew, the horse parlor, and was going there himself. He'd take me up. So he did.

"You know the setup, you've seen horse parlors. This was like any other but a little swankier than most you've seen. There weren't many there yet—just a few besides the ones I'd seen come up. It was early; Arlington wasn't running yet. But it was an hour later in the East and one New York track and one in Florida were running. And they had an open wire and posted results on a blackboard for each of the tracks.

"The room that would have been a kitchen if the apartment had been living quarters had a small bar in it and I drifted back there and found Pritch standing there studying his Pacing Form while he was having a drink. We said hi, and I ordered a drink, and while the bartender was making it I asked him if there were any extra Forms around, and he said sure, in the front room, so I went and got myself one and came back to dope races along with Pritch. And to make a short story long, I—"

“How’d you do?” I asked. “Personally, I mean.”

“Dropped about fifty. I’ll put half of it on the expense account, though. That’s about how little I could have got by with for the time I spent there.”

I’d just caught the waitress’s eye; she came over and we ordered refills. When she went away I nodded to him to go on.

“So Pritch was playing big money, damn it. Really big money for a bank cashier who probably makes less than two hundred a week. I never saw him bet less than fifty on any race he bet at all, and most of his bets ranged from a hundred to five hundred—that was the biggest single bet I saw him make.”

Uncle Am pounded the table softly with his fist. “He’s hooked, damn it, he’s hooked. That wasn’t his own money he was playing; it couldn’t have been. He’s in the soup for God knows how much and he’s plunging to get it back. I couldn’t keep exact track, but he dropped at least a thousand. Maybe even twice that.”

“And then what happened?”

“I guess he went broke. Anyway, he left suddenly. Just said, ‘That’s it for me today, Am,’ and high-tailed it. I stuck around long enough so it wouldn’t look as though I was leaving because he had, and then took off. I phoned Phoenix Indemnity from the drugstore and reported to Cogswell what happened. And went back to the office thinking you might have got through early at Dolan’s and come back. You hadn’t, so I phoned home and got you. And here we are.”

I said, “Sounds like you did a damn good job.”

“Oh, and I got a parking ticket while I was upstairs on Division. It was a one-hour meter and I was upstairs about two hours and got tagged. You got anything on in the morning?”

“Nothing. Want me to go down and pay it, so we’ll know how much to bill Phoenix?”

“I might as well do it myself. I’ll drop you off at the office to open up and I’ll stay in the car and run on down.”

“Did you eat anything, Uncle Am?”

“Just some of the iron rations while I was staked out at the house.”

Iron rations is what we call the grub we keep in the glove compartment of the Buick for emergencies. Concentrated stuff: packages of nuts and raisins, Hershey and other candy bars. When you’re on a solo shadow job you may be on it up to a dozen hours without a chance to eat or drink and there’s no use suffering more than you have to. We keep a few bottles of drinking water under the back seat, too. It’s always warm but when you’ve been staked out for hours, especially on a hot day, believe me, it’s better warm than not at all. We even have a very primitive sanitary arrangement—an empty milk bottle, if you must know—for use *in extremis*. When you’ve had bad experience on a few stakeouts, you think of possible emergencies in advance. Starting with making sure you have a full or almost full tank of gas. Doing a stakeout or a tail job with only one man in the car is a little different from starting out on an

ordinary drive during which you can stop anywhere you want to at any time.

“You’re probably hungry by now then,” I said. “Why don’t we get a pair of steak sandwiches while we’re here?” Tom, Dick and Harry’s isn’t a full-course restaurant but their steak sandwich is the best anywhere short of a top steak house.

He agreed and we put in our orders for two sandwiches and for one more drink apiece while we waited for them.

“Ed,” Uncle Am said, “there’s a damn thin line between liking to gamble and becoming a compulsive gambler. If I ever cross that line, promise you’ll shoot me.”

“Sure,” I said.

“I’m almost serious. Kid, it’s almost as bad as dope addiction and worse than alcoholism. Although it’s not exactly like either of those things—it’s less a craving, more a compulsion. And it makes less sense than either of those things because it’s even more meaningless. An addict at least gets a physical kick out of what he’s doing, no matter how lousy he feels afterward—

“Wait a minute, I’m thinking this out. Maybe the parallel is closer than I thought. You see, Ed, a compulsive gambler doesn’t gamble to win. He doesn’t give a damn, inside, whether he wins or not—except to the extent that being ahead instead of behind lets him keep on gambling longer. He gambles purely for the excitement of gambling. Oh, and he never *will* win because he’s psychologically incapable of quitting while he’s ahead. It isn’t the money that means anything to him; it’s just the excitement of keeping on gambling.

“Oh, he can quit temporarily ahead when a race and or a game breaks up, but that money isn’t money for spending; it’s for gambling again the next chance he gets. And if he’s enough ahead to justify it, he’ll look for a higher-stake game next time, or keep doubling or pyramiding his bets till he *does* lose and has to start over.”

I said, “Like Russian roulette—only with the guy keeping on spinning the cylinder and snapping the trigger until he does hit the loaded chamber.”

“And wins. Exactly. Nobody plays Russian roulette unless he *wants* to die but just hasn’t the guts to kill himself without making a game of it.”

“One thing about Russian roulette,” I said, “is that if you get the loaded chamber, you don’t have time to realize it.”

“You recommend it as a pastime then?”

Our steak sandwiches came and saved me from having to answer that one. Uncle Am dived in hungrily and I thought he had forgotten Joseph Pritchard, but halfway through he stopped and said, “Damn, Ed. In a way I hope that audit *does* show up embezzlement.”

I didn’t get the point and asked him why.

“If he’s been dipping, then he’s got what’s coming to him. Rut what if he’s honest—if he’s playing with his own money and just happened to be betting high because he was on a winning streak until today? Like maybe when he went out to the track his last day off he hit five winners in a row and came

away with a couple of grand. Then what he did today would fit the compulsive gambler pattern.”

I said, “So what, Uncle Am? You were hired to find out whether he was gambling heavily. You did find out. What Phoenix Indemnity does with the information isn’t your business.”

“No, but if they cancel his bond he’ll lose his job.”

“Sure, but you’ve got to see their point of view. They can’t possibly take a chance to carry bond on any man who’s a heavy gambler, compulsive or not. And Pritchard knows that. Even if he’s been gambling strictly with his own money, he knows he’s been gambling with his job too.”

“Yeah. But damn, I wish I’d known when Phoenix offered me the job that it was someone I knew. I could have turned it down—not for moral reasons, but for the valid reason that it’s risky to try to tail someone who knows you.”

“So Harry Cogswell would have called Starlock and the same thing would have happened. Wouldn’t it?”

Uncle Am didn’t answer, but he went back to his sandwich.

When we’d finished I said, “Well, one more drink and then the long ride?”

He thought a minute. “I’m not so crazy about that trip any more, Ed. Tell you what. Let’s go back home and play some gin rummy. We can pick up a bottle on the way home and have our drinks while we play.”

Chapter Ten

Gin rummy, the way Uncle Am and I play it at a dollar a point, can be a pretty vicious game. We play quite a bit, mostly during dull periods at the office—of which there are plenty—when neither of us has anything to do, and occasionally at home to kill an evening when neither of us wants to go anywhere and one or the other of us isn't in a mood to read. At a buck a point, it's not unusual for a single session to run to a thousand-dollar win for one of us and an equivalent loss for the other. But of course we can't either of us afford to pay off at stakes like that so we just keep a running score. And when one of us gets ten thousand bucks ahead, we cancel the debt and start over, except that the loser has to stand the two of us a dinner at one or another of the best restaurants in Chicago and a show if there's one running that we want to see; otherwise a few hours at a night club that has a good floor show. It's a good system; about once a month on the average it gets us a really fine dinner and an evening out that we wouldn't feel we could afford if we just went Dutch and did it cold.

But it was getting to look as though currently it was going to be a long time between nights out. We'd had our last one two months ago and since then neither of us could seem to get ten grand ahead. I'd been into Uncle Am for over eight thousand and then things had turned his way and he'd won that back and got into me for six thousand; but then the luck had turned again and at the moment we were damn near even, and a long time since our last excuse for a splurge.

Uncle Am brought the drinks and sat down across from me, reached for the deck to cut for deal, and then pulled his hand back. "Ed, what's the standing score?"

"You're eighty-two dollars ahead," I told him.

"That's as near as matters even. Why don't we play for ten bucks a point for the rest of this series? Otherwise we'll forget what a night out's like, the way things are going."

"That's compulsive gambling, Uncle Am. Shall I shoot you now or later?"

He made a rude noise, and the telephone rang. I was sitting within reach of it so I answered it. "Ed Hunter speaking."

"Mr. Hunter, this is Mike Dolan. I want to thank you for what you did for me last night, for bringing me home instead of calling the police. And I want to apologize for sneaking into your room."

"That's all right, Mike," I said. "Apology accepted. And the thanks too,

although they weren't necessary. I just did what I thought was the best thing to do. Thanks for calling, Mike."

"Good-by, Mr. Hunter."

"Wait, Mike. Any time you'd like to drop in on us and meet my uncle, feel free to do so, huh? Just so you remember to knock. Good-by, Mike."

And I hung up without waiting for him to answer because I knew he'd want time to think that over.

Am asked, "What's your guess on which of the other Dolans put him up to calling you?"

"Why would it matter? But I'd guess his mother."

"Why?"

"She's the one who thinks the episode is closed. To Vincent Dolan it's still open until he's had Mike to the psychologist, and Angela thinks it's still open too because she's the one who found the psychologist. But since he wants to play it down for his wife, he's not telling her."

"You're ahead of me, Ed. I've been spilling my own woes and never got around to asking you about your sessions with the Dolans. What's this about a psychologist? Let's wait till you tell me before we start to play."

I picked up my drink to take an occasional sip and started talking. I condensed the conversation with Sylvia Dolan because it didn't seem relevant except to indicate that Mike had been an almost disgustingly normal boy until last night's escapade, but I gave him my conversation with Vincent Dolan as nearly verbatim as I could remember it.

When I finished, he nodded slowly. "Curiouser and curiouser," he said.

He reached forward to cut for deal, and then pulled his hand back. "Kid, kidding aside, don't you think it's been a long time between nights out? If things keep on going this way it might be next year before we get one. How about upping the stakes this one time?"

"Never," I said. "A buck a point is plenty vicious; we can't possibly afford ten. But I'll tell you what I will do, this one time. We'll make the series for one thousand dollars instead of ten thousand. Okay?"

Uncle Am looked at me and pulled down a pair of imaginary spectacles to look at me better over the top of them. He said, "Kid, you missed your vocation. You should have been brought up Catholic so you could have become a Jesuit. All right, we cancel out the eighty-two dollars you owe me and start over, shooting for only a thousand."

He leaned forward and cut the deck, a deuce. He shoved me the deck. "Don't bother cutting, deal. I want to make another drink anyway. Shall I fresh up yours?"

I told him no; mine was half full. I dealt and we played three games; he won all three, although none of them was a big game, and I owed him five hundred and fifty-five dollars. But then I skunked him the fourth game for a double score and we were back almost even again and it was obvious neither of us was going to hit a thousand that session, at least unless we played all

night.

Uncle Am must have been feeling the way I did because when I picked up the deck to deal the fifth game he said, "Hold it, Ed. We're neither of us enjoying this much. We got too much on our minds." He looked at his watch. "It's not nine o'clock yet. What say we take that ride after all? You feel like it, and are you okay to drive?"

I told him yes on both counts and we got the car out again and I drove, north along the lake and out of town, as far north as Waukegan. Again, like last night, it was a beautiful balmy night. We didn't talk much.

On the northern outskirts of Waukegan we decided we'd gone far enough; we'd stop at the first place where we could get a sandwich—we were both getting just a little bit hungry again—and a drink and then head back. I turned in to the parking area of the next roadside restaurant that had a neon *Cocktails* sign and parked. A few people were standing beside parked cars and just outside the side door of the building, looking north and upward. We looked north and upward too, and there were the Northern Lights in the sky. Not a brilliant display, but a beautiful one, a high, thin, shimmering curtain of light. It looked like a real curtain, with real folds in the cloth. It was not quite the first but was definitely the best auroral display I'd ever seen, and it was definitely unusual for so far south, only thirty miles north of Chicago, and for that time of year. We watched it a while without talking at all before we went inside.

We took a booth and put in our orders and then Uncle Am said, "You should see them in Alaska sometime, Ed." I knew he was talking about the Northern Lights, but I looked at him in surprise because I didn't know he'd ever been in Alaska. But then there are a lot of things about Uncle Am that I don't know, up to the time when we got together after my father's death when I was eighteen. As of then, I'd seen him only a few times in my life, the last previous time when I was only eight years old.

"When were you in Alaska?" I asked him.

"Hell, kid, haven't you ever heard of the Gold Rush?"

"Be serious," I said. "*Were* you ever there?"

"Sure, kid. With a carnival. Right after War Two, in 1946. After all the wartime flurry of shipping you could buy boats for a song, and that spring a carney owner in Frisco got a bright idea; he bought a schooner and put a carney on it. I had one of the concessions. His idea was to cruise the coast and hit all the coast towns from Frisco up to, and including, Alaska. We did all right most places—once we were north of Puget Sound we were hitting towns that had never had a carnival before.

"But most of the towns were too small really to pay off and the nut was too high, and when winter started, which is damn early up thataway, we worked back to Seattle and packed it in. I never got inland in Alaska, just along the southern coast, but even from there and even in fall, you see some damn beautiful auroral displays. Well, here comes our grub."

When we went outside again the lights in the sky were gone.

We got back home about half-past midnight. It was one o'clock when I set the alarm for eight.

As I turned out the light and got into bed, my last thought was on the subject of time and when Uncle Am said, "Night, kid," I answered him, "My God, only twenty-eight hours."

"What's twenty-eight hours?"

I said, "Twenty-eight hours ago, almost on the head, I heard the hall light switch off and saw the crack of light under the door disappear. And up to then I'd never heard of the Dolans—except to know the name Vincent Dolan. Twenty-eight hours ago, and it seems like a year. Well, 'night."

If he answered it would have been more than a second later because I didn't hear him. I went to sleep like a light goes out when you push the switch button.

And slept for almost an hour.

I wakened a second or two before the pounding on the door. The sounds that preceded it weren't loud but they were unusual enough to have snapped me awake instantly. There were running footsteps along the hallway toward our door—footsteps that seemed unusual because they were softish thuds as though whoever was making them wore soft-soled slippers instead of shoes. And breathing that was almost wheezing, the labored breathing of a man spent from sprinting. Then the pounding, technically a knock because it was done with knuckles, but it must have hurt the knuckles that were doing it.

I was out of bed, or anyway my feet were, when the knocking sounded, and was there and had the door open before a second round of it could start. Behind me Uncle Am had reached up and turned on the bed lamp; there was light from within as well as from outside as I threw the door open.

It was Robert Sideco, the Filipino houseboy of the Dolans, in a gaudy patterned silk robe over even gaudier pajamas, in slippers as I had guessed from the sound of the running footsteps, with his eyes wide and his hair mussed.

His almost-falsetto voice, almost hysterical, was even higher-pitched than when I'd heard it once before.

"Missa Dolan want you. Come right away, hurry, please. Both of you, please."

He turned to go, but I said, "*What happened?*" so sharply that he answered me, back over his shoulder. "Missie Angela, she hurt. Buralgers."

And then there was only his receding back and the pound of slipped footsteps down the hall and down the stairs, but by that time I had the door closed and the main light on and was doing a fireman's job of getting into clothes, and Uncle Am was doing the same.

We threw on the first things that came to hand, and didn't bother with neckties. I was swearing to myself because I'd taken the extra revolver, the Iver Johnson, to the office to keep with our other hardware. Not that

“burglars” at the Dolans’ would likely be waiting around to shoot it out with us, but I didn’t know what the hell we were walking into and I’d have felt better if at least one of us, whichever, had some kind of a weapon to take. Also I was swearing, and out loud, at Robert for having said that, “Missie Angela, she hurt” fine and running away before I could even ask him how *badly* she was hurt and what the hell it was all about, and had Dolan called the cops, and half a dozen other things.

In the street, we didn’t run—whatever had happened had happened and a few seconds weren’t going to make any difference—but we walked damn fast. I saw that Uncle Am’s hair was almost as messed as Robert’s had been and remembered I had a pocket comb with me; I used it and then handed it to him to use.

We went up the steps together and I reached out a finger for the doorbell, but Uncle Am said, “Don’t ring, Ed. Look, the door’s open a crack, not latched.”

He pushed the door open and we went in. No one was in sight in the hallway or on the stairs. The door to Dolan’s study or office or library, whatever you want to call it, was open and I decided he must be in there and started that way. He was there and heard our footsteps because he called out, “Ed? Am? In here,” before we reached the doorway.

He was seated behind his desk and I saw that there was a pistol, a thirty-two automatic, lying on the desk blotter in front of him. He wore a beautiful brocaded robe. His face was like granite.

I asked the most important thing first. “How’s Angela? Is she seriously hurt?”

He shook his head. “Not seriously. Slugged a couple of times. Doctor will be here in a minute.”

“Where is she?”

“In her room. The housekeeper’s with her. You have guns?”

I explained that all our artillery was at the office.

He used a key to open a bottom drawer of the desk and came up with another gun, a duplicate of the one that lay before him. “You each take one,” he said. “With each of you heeled I won’t need one. And George Steck will be here in ten or fifteen minutes and then there’ll be another gun around.”

“You think the burglar is still around?”

“Burglars plural, if that’s what they are. There are two of them. No, I don’t think they’re still around, but we’re going to search the place from cellar to attic to make sure they did leave. Am, you—”

“Are cops coming?” I interrupted. “Did you call them?”

“No. We can handle this part of it ourselves. But we’re not going to start the search till the doctor’s been here and George comes, so there’ll be four of us. Am, you find the back door and stay by it. They didn’t leave that way because it’s bolted on the inside; I checked that. But see that nobody does leave that way.”

Uncle Am nodded and picked up one of the two pistols. He checked that there was a cartridge in the chamber and then checked the safety. I did the same with the other gun and put it in my pocket.

“And I do the same with the front door?” I asked, as Uncle Am left toward the back of the house.

“If you stand in the doorway there you can keep an eye on it and we can still talk. I had it a little ajar so you could come in without ringing. Did you leave it that way?”

“Yes. Account of Mike?”

He nodded. “It probably wouldn’t wake him, but it might. Maybe you better open it a little wider, a few inches, so the doctor and George will be sure not to ring.”

I did and then came back to the doorway. Just as I got there Robert came in sight at the top of the flight of stairs and Elsie, the maid, in a flannel bathrobe and rubbing her eyes sleepily, was with him. They came down the stairs and past me into the den and I heard Dolan ask her, “Elsie, did you see or hear anything unusual tonight?”

“No, sir.”

“What time did you go to sleep?”

“‘Bout ‘leven, I guess, Mr. Dolan.”

“And slept through till Robert knocked on your door a few minutes ago?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Elsie, you can go back to bed. I’m afraid we’ll be waking you once more pretty soon, but there’s nothing to worry about. We’re going to be searching the house, and I mean really searching it, even rooms with the people sleeping in them. You understand?”

“Yes, Mist’ Dolan. Robert tell me what happen when he wake me up. Is Miss Angela all right?”

“Thanks, Elsie. Yes, she’s all right. Robert, walk with her back to her room and then look in Miss Angela’s room and ask Mrs. Anderson if there’s anything you can do or get for her. If there isn’t you can go to your own room and wait there. I’ll ring if I need you again.”

They passed me and headed back and I asked Dolan, “Think there’ll be time now for you to tell me what happened, from the beginning?”

“Probably. There isn’t much to tell.” He glanced at his wrist watch. “Five after two now. It must have been about ten minutes of two. I was sound asleep when Angela burst into my room crying and—”

“Just a minute,” I said. “A car’s stopping in front.”

Chapter Eleven

I went to the front door and opened it. A small man with a small black bag was just getting out of a car at the curb. He'd been here before because he headed right for the door and past me with only a nod, apparently not even wondering who I was or what I was doing there.

Dolan was out of his room by then and said, "This way, Doctor," and started toward the stairs.

I stepped outside into the night and stood a moment on the top step looking around to see if Steck's car was coming, but no car was moving anywhere in sight. The night air felt good, though, and I stood there a few minutes until I heard a sound behind me and turned. Dolan was coming back down the stairs. I came back in and pulled the door partway shut.

He went into the den again but this time didn't go around behind the desk; he sat on a corner of it, and I took my post in the doorway again.

He said, "Guess I'll have time to finish talking before George gets here. He lives a good half hour away, even in middle-of-the-night no-traffic. Where was I? Oh, yes, about ten minutes of two. And I was asleep—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Dolan," I said. "Will you start a little back of that, say about the time you turned in? So I'll know who was in the house and still up, and things like that?"

"All right. I turned in a little earlier than I usually do, about eleven. Everybody was home but Angela. She's tangled with an amateur theatrical group at the University—not acting but as an assistant director—and they rehearsed tonight. She'd said she probably wouldn't be home till midnight or a little after.

"I don't know whether I was the last one of the rest of us awake but I was the last one up and about. Mike was asleep; I looked in on him before I retired myself. Sylvia had taken a bottle to her room right after Mike had been put to bed. That's when she does her heavy drinking, late evenings. Claims she can't go to sleep and would stay awake all night if—Well, anyway, she was in her room. I checked both doors to make sure they were locked before I went upstairs."

"And the back one bolted?"

"No. The so-called back door doesn't really lead outside; it leads into a two-car garage that I had built on at the back of the building. Angie and I keep our cars there. She had hers of course and would put it in the garage and then let herself in the back way. When she does, she bolts the door—unless my car

is gone and she knows I'm out with it."

"She bolted it tonight?"

"It's bolted. She must have, when she came in. Where was I? Oh, just going to bed. The three servants were all in their rooms; asleep or not, I don't know. All their rooms are on the third floor; the rest of us each has a separate bedroom on the second.

"That's the picture as of when I went to sleep. Angie says she got home somewhere around midnight, turned in and went to sleep. Her room's next to mine.

"She's a light sleeper and a sound woke her up. She sat up in bed when she saw that the door of her room was opening. She says she wasn't scared at first: her first thought was that I was looking in to see if she got home all right, maybe talk a minute. She put her feet out of bed and stood up, reaching for the robe hanging on the bedpost—and two men came into the room. They—"

"How much light was there?"

"Negligible. It wasn't pitch dark but she could see them only as shadows. She won't be able to identify them. Best she can do in the way of a description is that one of them was about average size, the other a little taller than that. She thinks they wore dark clothes, but the one that hit her wore a white shirt; she could catch a gleam of white as he swung to face her. She thinks they both wore hats, but she's not even sure of that.

"So one of them whirled and saw her standing there by her bed—white pajamas would have made her relatively easy to see in the dark—took the one step that brought him in range, and hit her a one-two. The first blow, probably a left, hit her in the right eye; she's going to have a really beautiful shiner by tomorrow. And the second was probably aimed at the button but caught her alongside the jaw—the left side, so it would have been a right-hand punch.

"*On* the button, it would probably have knocked her out, but as it was it took her off her feet and back across the bed she'd just got out of. Seeing stars, but still conscious. But she did the smartest thing she could have done—lay still as though she *was* unconscious. She tells me her mind was working fast and she figured probably they'd come to get me—and that makes sense. Not that I have any enemies that I know of, Ed, but damn it, it ties in now with what Mike heard and—hell, it makes no sense at all that they'd have come after *her*."

"Unless to kidnap her," I suggested.

"She didn't think of that possibility, I guess. She figured that they were looking for me and had got into her room by mistake. Her plan was to wait till they'd left, then get to her door and lock it. And, once she was safe from them behind a locked door, she was going to start screaming to give me warning before they could get to my room."

"Damned smart thinking," I said. "Best thing she could have done—but—"

"But she didn't, no. They didn't close her door after them, left it a little ajar. So when she got to it, she could hear—and what she heard was their

footsteps starting down the stairs, not heading for my room. So she waited a minute until she was sure they couldn't see her and then came to my room and waked me.

"She'd let down and was crying by then, and it took me maybe a minute to learn enough from her to know what to do. Then I got a gun and ran down the stairs. But by the time I got there the front door was ajar and they were presumably gone."

"But you want to search the house anyway?"

"Sure, as soon as George gets here and there are four of us. And I asked him to bring an extra gun."

I said, "You keep—kept—one gun locked in a drawer of your desk there, and the other one upstairs in your room. Does Mike know about either of them?"

"No, he doesn't know there's a gun in the house. The one I keep in my bedroom isn't locked up, but it's kept in a place where he'd never think to look even if he knew there was a gun to look for."

I thought I heard a sound behind me and turned to see. The little doctor was coming down the stairs. I nodded to Dolan and stepped back to let the doctor pass me. And stayed back from the doorway in case he might want to close the door and talk privately. But he didn't.

"Nothing at all, Mr. Dolan," he said pleasantly. "I mean besides what you told me. A black eye and a sore jaw."

"You're sure nothing's broken?"

"Positive. If you want to be really sure you might make an appointment for her to see her dentist sometime within the next few days to have the teeth on that side checked. But none of them seems to have been loosened."

"No reason why she should come to your office too, for a checkup?"

"No reason at all. I gave her a sedative and she should go to sleep within an hour. She doesn't seem upset mentally, but it is probably a good idea to have someone stay with her till she does sleep. Your housekeeper seems competent in that department."

"Right," Dolan said. "Her classes tomorrow. Do you think she should go to them or stay home?"

The doctor shrugged. "If she wants to there's no reason why she shouldn't. She'll probably want to wear sunglasses on account of that shiner. Or I can recommend a cosmetologist who can do a fair job of painting it out. I don't have his number with me; she can phone my office tomorrow if she wants it."

I walked to the door with the doctor to see that he didn't close it behind him and while I was there I took another look around outside while he was getting into his car. Still no sign of George Steck.

I went back to my post in the doorway. "This guy Steck," I said. "Do you trust him, Mr. Dolan?"

"Within reason. Why?"

"Just wondered whether you really wanted him here or whether you

phoned him first thing partly to make sure he was really at his own place half an hour away when the attack happened.”

“It doesn’t hurt to be sure of a thing, does it? Not that I know of any reason he’d have to have been here or to attack Angie.”

“But the possibility did enter your mind,” I said. “And how about the Hunters? Did you send Robert instead of phoning us so he could see whether we were in bed and not still up and dressed?”

He gave a short little laugh that was almost like a bark. “Now that *didn’t* occur to me. No, I sent Robert because I had to make the phone calls to the doctor and to George and I figured he’d get there faster than a third phone call. Besides, it got Robert out of my hair while I was making the other calls.”

“He made it fast all right,” I said. “Is this going to change your plans any, Mr. Dolan?”

“Plans about what?”

“Taking Mike to that psychologist tomorrow. It sure doesn’t look now as though he was dreaming *or* imagining things yesterday afternoon.”

“Good God, no. And Angela sure wasn’t dreaming or imagining tonight. If you saw her face—”

I’d very much have liked to do just that and to have got her story firsthand. But there didn’t seem to be any reasonable excuse for me to ask to talk to her, especially since she’d been given a sedative.

Dolan sighed. “Yeah, this *does* change things about Mike’s story. No, I won’t take him in tomorrow—or not ever till I find out what’s behind this—Damn, I wish George would get here so we could get going.” He looked impatiently at his wrist watch.

“Listen, Mr. Dolan,” I said, “searching this house is well and good, but don’t you think we’re going off half-cocked? I mean, hadn’t we ought to talk things over first and see if anybody has any idea who those men could be and what the hell they want—or wanted—here. Probably they’ve left and there’s no hurry. If they didn’t leave, if they’re hiding out here—I don’t know why you think they might be—there’s no hurry either. But—Hold it. Car stopping.”

I went back to the front door. A Caddy was at the curb where the doctor’s car had parked, and two men were getting out of it. One was the big, handsome George Steck, whom I’d seen briefly the night before; the other man was a bit older, short—at least compared to Steck—and with the odd combination of a slender body and a round moon face. He looked vaguely familiar, like someone I’d seen before but couldn’t place. He gave me a cool look as though he’d seen me somewhere before too, and waited for Steck to come around from the driver’s side of the car and lead the way.

Steck paused on the bottom of the three steps and looked up at me without pleasure or without animosity. “You’re—let’s see, Ed Hunter? What are you doing here?”

“Same thing you are,” I said. “Mr. Dolan sent for me. He’s waiting in his

study.”

I stepped back to let them pass me and then closed the door and followed them as far as my post in the doorway.

Dolan was back sitting behind the desk. He said, “Hi, George” to Steck and then “Hi, Ernie” to the other man. Then back to Steck, “I’m glad you brought him, but how come? Was he with you when I called?”

Steck shook his head. “You told me to bring an extra gun, Vince, but you hung up before I could ask if you meant just a gun or one with someone to hold it. Ernie lives only a few blocks from me and on my way here, so I played safe both ways. I brought this—” He took a heavy forty-five automatic from the side pocket of his coat and handed it butt first to Dolan—“and picked up Ernie too. And he’s got his own rod.”

“Good,” Dolan said. “Makes five of us heeled and that will be plenty.”

Steck looked over his shoulder at me and then back at Dolan and his expression must have asked who the fifth man was because Dolan answered the question. “Ed’s uncle and partner. He’s at the back door and—”

I was the one who interrupted this time. Again I’d heard a sound from the stairway end of the hall and had stepped back to look up. Two women were coming downstairs.

Angela was in the lead. She wore a light blue belted robe of some quilted material over white pajamas; a diagonal gauze bandage around her head and covering her right eye looked almost rakish, and contrasted beautifully with the black that was almost blue-black of her hair. Her face looked a little pale, which made the redness and slight swelling on the left side of her jaw more obvious than it would have been otherwise. But her one visible eye was bright and wide awake, and she’d taken the trouble to put on lipstick before starting downstairs. For me? I wondered. Her father must have told her he was sending for us, either before or after he’d done so.

Following her, and looking disapproving, was a stout woman with graying hair. That would be the housekeeper, Mrs. Anderson.

I looked into the study long enough to say, “Your daughter’s coming, Mr. Dolan.”

He got up and started around the desk as I stepped back to let her past me. She smiled at me and said, “Hello, Ed Hunter”—a nice touch, I thought.

I said, “Hello, Miss Dolan.”

She reached the doorway about the same time as Dolan himself, and for the moment he blocked her way. “Angela,” he said, “you should be upstairs trying to sleep. Dr. Agnew gave you a sedative and—”

“Now, Dad,” she said, “after what happened, I’ve got a *right* to know what goes on.” Her voice was light, but she was being firm. “I’m wide awake and feeling fine. That sedative isn’t going to take effect right away, if it ever does. Besides, one of the reasons I came down is to have a drink, a strong one. That’ll give me more help in going to sleep than six sedatives.”

He growled, “You could have sent Mrs. Anderson for one.”

“If you hadn’t told her not to leave me under any circumstances I could have. Besides, I want to find out what’s going on. I’m free, white, and twenty-two and I’m involved, so I want to know.”

He gave up and stepped back. She said, “Hello, George. Hello, Ernie,” and then looked around. “I thought you were sending for both of the Hunters, Dad. Wasn’t Ed’s uncle available?”

I answered for him, to get in a dig at Dolan. “He’s been exiled to Siberia, Miss Dolan. Guarding the back door.”

She’d started toward the chair beside the desk but she stopped and turned. “Then I’m going back and introduce myself. And, Dad, I’ll make myself that drink while I’m there.”

“All right,” Dolan said. “But come right back. I want to get this house search out of the way. Ed, you go back with her and see that she doesn’t stay more than a minute. George, you take Ed’s post in the doorway. Just make sure nobody goes past and out the front door.”

Chapter Twelve

Angela went past me and I followed her down the hall. Behind me in the hallway I heard Dolan telling the housekeeper, “You can go back to bed now, Mrs. Anderson. Thanks for helping. And, oh, on your way, will you look in on Mike again and make sure he’s all right and still asleep?”

Angela turned into the lighted living room and I followed. I expected her to make a stopover at the liquor cabinet. She didn’t, but she must have guessed that I thought she would because she said, “There’s liquor in the kitchen, Ed. No use wasting time stopping here.”

She went on through the room; a doorway without a door in it led us into a big dining room, and we started around the long dining table toward a door at the other end. There was no light on here but enough light came through the doorway from the living room to let us see our way through easily.

I was about two steps behind Angela, and when, about halfway through, she stopped suddenly and turned, she was in my arms without my even thinking about it, and her own arms went up and around my neck. “Oh, Ed,” she whispered. “Hold me a moment. I’m *scared*. I’ve been pretending I’m not, but I am.”

“I don’t blame you, honey,” I whispered back. “Do you have *any* idea who those men could have been, or what they were here for?”

“God, I wish I did. It’s so—so *meaningless*. They had to have *some* reason for coming here but—when they knocked me down and I pretended to be unconscious, why didn’t they tie me up, gag me, and go ahead with—with whatever they came for?”

I’d been wondering that, but I didn’t have any answer for her. None at all. And Dolan must have thought about it, and that must be why he’d come up with the idea that the men were possibly still here, hiding somewhere and waiting. And that open front door—Wouldn’t it have been natural for them to pull it shut behind them, to delay any pursuit for a second or two, to make it less immediately obvious which way they’d gone?

But it would have been easy for them to open it to make it look as though they’d gone and then duck back and hide somewhere in the house. They’d have had plenty of time. Angela had gone to her father’s room about the time they reached the bottom of the stairs, but it would have taken him at least a minute to get enough of the story out of her, especially as she’d been crying, and then decide how to act on it, to have got his gun from wherever in his bedroom he kept it hidden and gone downstairs with it.

At the moment, though, the thing to do was reassure Angela, so I said, “Whatever it is, Angela, I don’t think you’ve got anything more to be afraid of. They had a chance to hurt you—seriously, I mean—and they didn’t. Besides, your father is alerted now; he won’t be taking any chances. Maybe tonight wouldn’t have happened if he’d believed Mike’s story of what happened yesterday afternoon.”

She nodded slowly, as though I’d reassured her at least a little. “Kiss me once, Ed, and then we’d better go on.”

I kissed her. A fairly long kiss, a very sweet one. Tenderness instead of passion. And she responded the same way.

Then she went on to and through the door at the back of the dining room. It led to a short pantry and that led to a big, very modern, and well-equipped kitchen. Uncle Am came to his feet as we entered; he’d been sitting in a chair he’d pulled up with its back against the door he was guarding.

“Am Hunter? I’m Angela. Ed’s told me a lot about you—and you look exactly as he described you.”

She crossed quickly to him and gave him her hand. Uncle Am grinned as he took it. “Do I look as bad as that?” he asked her.

“As *good* as that,” she said. “It’s I who should apologize for the way I look right now. But I didn’t do it to myself.”

I cut in to break up whatever would have been Uncle Am’s complimentary disclaimer to that one. “Angela, tell me where the liquor is and I’ll make that drink for you.”

She pointed three times. “Glasses there, whiskey there, ice and soda there. Make three if you’ll each have one with me.”

I started to say we’d better not but Uncle Am said, “Kid, I could use a short jolt straight. I’m still half asleep and it would wake me up, I hope.”

So if he was going to have one I would too, I decided. I found a bottle of Jack Daniels and poured a sizable jolt of it into a tall glass for Angela, found two small glasses and poured straight shots in them. I took Angela’s tall drink to her and Uncle Am came over and picked up his. He lifted his toward her. “To our meeting, finally.”

We drank to that, Uncle Am and I down the hatch and Angela taking a sip of hers. Then Uncle Am laughed. “I just realized what I said. ‘Finally.’ I’d never heard of your existence until not much over twenty-four hours ago. That seems impossible.”

He put his glass down and turned to me. “Kid, what’s been going on? How long am I going to be stuck out here, out of everything?”

I told him the score, briefly. I said, “Probably he’ll want us to stay on guard at the doors as we have been. I’ll see that you get into the act the minute that search is over.”

Angela smiled at Uncle Am. “Glad to have met you, Am, even if only for a minute. Daddy will probably have chased me back to bed by the time you get out of Siberia, as Ed called it.”

Uncle Am said, "Thanks, Angela. Hope we do meet again." He turned to me. "Kid, before you go up front better wipe that lipstick off your yap."

I muttered a thanks and got out my handkerchief and rubbed my lips hard. But no red came off on it, and Angela laughed. If it wasn't so much of a cliché I'd say her laughter sounded like a tinkling of silver bells. Hell, I'll say it anyway, because that's the way it did sound, cliché or no cliché. She said, "Ed, your uncle made a fool out of you and made you give us away. You haven't any lipstick; this kind doesn't come off."

Maybe there was no red on my handkerchief, but from the temperature of my face, I knew that *it* was plenty red. I growled at Uncle Am, who was grinning at me like a damn Cheshire cat—if I can get away with two clichés in a row—and said that I'd get even with him later, and took off after Angela, who was almost at the door.

But she turned before she went through it. "Am, may I ask you one question?"

He nodded. "Sure."

"Who dumped the load of sand in Mrs. Murphy's baby grand?"

He grinned at her. "Who put the Plymouth Rock in Mrs. Murphy's cuckoo clock?"

She made a moue at him. "You win that one. I'll have a better one next time. I'm getting the idea."

She went on into the pantry and I followed her. Behind me I could hear Uncle Am chuckling, and I knew he liked her.

She didn't stop until we were back at the study. Dolan was sitting back of the desk again. Steck was in the doorway but he moved back into the room to let Angela go past him, and I took up the doorway post. The moon-faced man called Ernie had been sitting in the comfortable chair alongside the desk but got up quickly to let Angela have it.

Dolan growled at her, something about having taken her time, as she sat down. But then he relented and patted her shoulder as he stood up and started around the desk. "It was all right, honey. Gave me time to tell George and Ernie the details of what happened."

He turned to me. "Ed, you stay where you are and we'll leave Am where he is. We'll start at the top and work down."

"Why not the basement first?" Steck asked. "If they *are* hiding out, that's more likely where they'd be. They wouldn't take the risk of going back up the stairs after Angela heard them going down."

"True, but if they're there they can wait for us. I'd rather start at the top because probably none of the servants has got back to sleep yet and I can take care of their rooms without having to wake them up again. Any more suggestions before we start?"

"One," Steck said. "If that detective in the kitchen is just watching the back door he can open the door to the stairwell for the back steps. If he stands there he can still see the back door but he can also see that nobody but us goes up or

down those back steps. We don't want to look upstairs and then have somebody *get* upstairs from the basement while we're searching this floor."

"Good thinking, George. We'll go back and explain that to him first and then go on up the back stairs and start at the top. Come on."

I moved aside to let them past me; Dolan came last and stopped in the doorway for a final word to Angela.

"Honey," he said, "now that you're here I'd just as soon you stayed here until we've finished the upper floors. Then when you do go up to turn in, we'll know it's safe for you up there. You're not getting sleepy yet, are you?"

Angela shook her head. "I'm fine, Dad. Don't worry about me."

"Attagirl. It won't take us long."

He turned and caught up with the other two men and I heard him tell them, "Let me go first. Am doesn't know either of you and we don't want any gun battles by mistake." And then they were out of hearing.

I leaned against the door jamb and asked Angela if her face hurt.

"Not much, Ed. The eye throbs a little but not as badly as it did for a while. The doctor put some kind of a compress on it." She touched the side of her face gingerly with her fingertips. "My jaw is a little sore to the touch, but not otherwise. I imagine I'll be eating mostly soft foods for a day or two though."

I asked, "Angela, what's your opinion on how those men could have got in?"

"With a key, of course. There isn't any other way, Ed. This place is air conditioned and the few windows there are—just at the front and back; the building is up tight against the ones on both sides—are sealed.

"They probably came in the front door. I bolted the back one when I came in at midnight so unless they came in before midnight and hid out at least two hours, it had to be by way of the front door."

"I don't see why they'd have waited two hours. Or for that matter why they'd be hiding now."

"They probably aren't. But I can see Dad's point in wanting to be a hundred-percent sure. I'll feel better myself when we *know* that they really left."

"But how would they have got a key? I don't imagine your father passes them out freely."

"Hardly. But with seven sets of keys kicking around it wouldn't be too hard for someone to manage to get hold of one long enough to have a duplicate made—or at least to make an impression of it from which a key could be cut."

"Could be" I said. "I imagine your father will have the locks changed first thing tomorrow."

"If he doesn't think of it himself, I'm going to suggest it. Also that he doesn't give the new keys to *all* of us. It'll be a nuisance having to answer the doorbell to let one another in, but we can put up with that for a while.

"I'm going to make another suggestion too—a bolt for the front door. Then

the last one in can bolt it, as we do the back one. If there was one on now, Dad could have bolted it when he went to bed last night, since he knew I'd come in from the garage, and probably we wouldn't have had company at all."

I told her that made sense too, and just then I heard a sound and turned. Dolan was starting down the staircase, with George Steck and Ernie behind him. He turned to them when they reached the bottom and I heard him say, "Okay, you boys take this floor. I want to talk to Angela a moment."

"Okay," Steck told him. "Then shall we go on down, or wait for you at the basement steps?"

"Wait for me. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Dolan came toward me and I stepped back inside to let him past me. "Well," he said, "all's clear upstairs."

"Sylvia all right?" Angela asked him.

He nodded. "She must have had a drink or two more than usual; she slept through everything. Didn't even wake up when I searched her room."

"Poor Sylvia. But that reminds me, Dad—may I have a second drink now?" She held out her glass. "Ed can make it for me, now that you're here."

I said, "Sure. Glad to." I went over and got the glass from her. "While I'm doing it, this might be a good time to tell your father your suggestions about locks and keys."

She nodded and was already telling him, when I left, what her thought had been.

He left as soon as I came back with the drink.

I filled in the time getting Angela's firsthand account of what had happened in her room; it didn't differ in any way from the secondhand account I'd already heard from Dolan.

About ten minutes later they came back from their search of the basement. This time Uncle Am was with them; he was finally released from his exile in Siberia.

Chapter Thirteen

It was three-thirty, about an hour and a half after the excitement had started, and now it was over except for the post-mortem three of us, Dolan and Uncle Am and I, were holding in Dolan's study.

The house was free of intruders, and it was going to stay that way, at least for the rest of the night, for there was now a bolt on the front door as well as on the back one. While searching the basement, Dolan had found an extra door bolt in a toolroom and had brought it and a few tools up with him. The moon-faced man named Ernie had volunteered to put it on. He'd finished ten minutes ago. He and Steck had offered to stay as long as Dolan wanted them, but he'd said there was nothing more they could do tonight and had shooed them out, with thanks. And bolted the door behind them.

Angela had finally decided she was sleepy enough to go back to bed, and Dolan had walked upstairs with her. I'd taken advantage of the few minutes he was gone to bring Uncle Am up to date on the few things I'd learned that he hadn't. It wasn't much.

And now Dolan was back with us and had said he'd be glad to listen to any ideas or suggestions we might have.

I looked to Uncle Am to let him take the lead.

"First, Mr. Dolan—" he started.

Dolan interrupted. "Might as well make it Vince. I've been calling you Am and Ed."

"Okay, Vince. First, there's the question whether or not we can do anything more for you at all. Legally, I mean. Tonight was an emergency, or seemed to be, so we didn't quibble, and won't quibble, about the fact that you called us instead of the cops. But as far as continuing on the case is concerned, it may make a difference."

"Why, Am? There's no law requiring a householder to report a—a burglary, I guess we'll have to call it—if he doesn't want to. Even if something was stolen, and as far as we know, nothing was. A murder or a more serious crime, yes. Or if Angela had been seriously injured—but she wasn't."

"No, she wasn't. A gunshot wound you'd have had to report—and so would the doctor who treated her—but not a black eye. But that's not what I'm getting at. What if your hunch had been right and those men still *had* been here. What would you have done with them?"

"Damn it, Am, how can I answer that? It would have depended on *them*. If

they'd been armed and wanted to shoot it out, what choice would I have had? In that case, I would have *had* to call the police. And to turn over whatever was left of them. But I'd have been in the clear and so would whoever had been helping me. It would have been self-defense—besides the fact that they'd have been caught *in flagrante*.”

“But if they'd have been unarmed? Or, armed or not, have turned themselves over peaceably?”

“How the hell do I know what I'd have done with them without knowing what they'd have to *say* about why they were here? I'd probably have turned them over, but how can I say for sure? Maybe I'd have thrown a scare in them—and blacked four eyes to make up for Angela's one. Again there's no law that I'd have had to turn them over to the cops.

“But I can tell you there's one thing I *wouldn't* have done, and that's kill them or have them killed in cold blood, or taken for a ride or—Hell, Am, the day for that is past. I'm a businessman, not a gangster. The only thing is that my business is illegal and, for that reason, the less I have to play footsie with the cops, the better off I am. There's a reform administration in right now and a D.A. who'd like nothing better than an excuse to ask me questions I'd find embarrassing to answer.”

Uncle Am nodded. “I can see that, Vince. But here's *our* problem. Mine and Ed's, I mean. Helping you catch some criminals *in flagrante* tonight would have been one thing. And I'll take your word for it you wouldn't have had them killed in cold blood because if you had you'd have had to kill Ed and me too—and that would have been quite a massacre.

“But say we keep on working on the case and do come up with the identity of those men and their reason for having been here, what it was they had in mind to accomplish and apparently didn't succeed in doing. God knows how we'd get that information for you, but say we do. Would you go to the police with that information? Or take care of them yourselves?—which would make us accessories.”

“Let me think this out, Am. Wait, I'll put it this way. I can't promise to take information to the police until I learn what that information is. But—if you want to keen on working for me—I can and will promise this. No rides, no private revenge. At least nothing worse than a beating—and you've got to admit they've got that much coming already for what they did to Angela. And that only if I find they're unimportant, not *worth* turning over to the cops. Okay?”

Uncle Am turned toward me and cocked an eyebrow. “What do you think, Ed?”

Thank God was my first thought. I'd been holding my breath for fear Uncle Am had been going to turn the case down flat. If he had, he'd have been completely justified and I'd have gone along with him. And I'd have survived; one doesn't die of curiosity, any more than one dies of love or grief. But it wouldn't have been easy.

I said, "Mr. Dolan's right on one thing, Uncle Am. No major crime has been committed."

"Kid, no major crime has been committed yet. And *yet* is a pretty operative word in that sentence. If one is committed, it'll have to be reported to the police—and they're going to take a damn dim view even of what we've done already. Whatever this is all about, you can't call it less than a potentially explosive situation. Are you willing to take the risk?"

I said, "*I* am, but—"

Dolan interrupted me. "Just a minute, boys. I take it you're not talking about risks in the ordinary sense. Just worrying about the possibility of getting your licenses lifted. Right?"

"Right," Uncle Am told him.

"Then quit worrying. The reason I didn't call the police tonight was that I didn't want this handled on the precinct level—with this house full of policemen and probably reporters. The newspapers would have a field day with what happened tonight if they knew about it. You know the angle they'd take—gang war coming back, that sort of thing. Be the worst thing that could happen for the syndicate, and I'm not so high up that I might not find myself out on my ear for getting them that kind of publicity. You can understand that.

"But that doesn't mean I'm not going to have a quiet talk to at least one square cop—one who'll listen to me and maybe give me some good advice and still keep the story under his hat. Do you know Captain Brandt, downtown?"

Uncle Am nodded.

"Good. One thing on my agenda tomorrow—today—is a talk with him. Would he know your names?"

Uncle Am nodded again. "At least I think he'll remember us. We've met him casually, but several times."

"Good. I'll tell him that, because I don't want this handled as a routine police matter, I'm having you boys investigate a few angles for me. Will that take you off the hook?"

Uncle Am grinned. "It will indeed. So to the postmortem session. Mind if I lead off by asking a few questions?"

"Shoot." Dolan leaned back in his chair.

"If only to eliminate it, the possibility that they were more or less ordinary burglars on the prowl for money. Is there much of it around?"

"Not what I'd call much. No syndicate money. It's not kept here. Oh, once in a while I get stuck with a few thousand that I have to hold overnight till I can bank it or pass it on—say to a bookie who got hit for a big payoff. But there's none on hand right now, hasn't been for a week or so."

He pointed to a small safe in plain sight at one end of the room. "That's where it would be if there was any. Right now it's got about four hundred dollars in it. My personal money—I pay a lot of bills in cash and keep somewhere around that much on hand most of the time. And some of my

personal papers. No syndicate records.”

“Then this isn’t your business office?”

“No, I’ve got offices, a suite, in the Loop. And before you ask—yes, what money was in the safe is still there. I opened it and checked after I’d made my phone calls and while you two were on your way here.”

Uncle Am nodded. “Have you checked if anything else valuable might be missing? They could simply have not known how to tackle a safe.”

“Sylvia and Angela each have furs, some jewelry. They couldn’t have taken anything of Angela’s since she woke up when they came into her room. I glanced in Sylvia’s closet and in her jewel box while I was searching upstairs. Everything okay. If they’d happened to get into her room instead of Angela’s they could have helped themselves. She didn’t wake even when I turned on the light.”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “If it was, as you put it, burglars in the ordinary sense, it was a pretty stupid pair of them. I simply don’t buy that that’s what they were.”

“Would you buy the possibility that they were kidnappers, after Mike? I know that doesn’t fit in with the conversation he overheard, but leave that out of it for a minute. All the money and jewelry in the house would be peanuts to what you’d pay to get him back.”

“I’d have paid as much for Angela. And they’d surely have known that. Nobody plans a snatch without casing the job enough for them to have known who she was. You can say they were ready to carry off a small boy but not a grown woman—but that’s pretty thin and you know it. And they thought they’d knocked her out. Why didn’t they follow through and tie and gag her? No, I don’t think they were after either of my kids.”

He sighed. “But I’m going to get Mike away from here anyway. I don’t want him to have any more bad experiences. His school’s out in another ten days anyway and I’d promised to send him to a summer camp up in Wisconsin. They won’t hold him back a year just for ten days. I’ll phone the camp and send him up tomorrow, have a couple of boys I can trust drive him up.”

“A good idea,” I said. “And you don’t think Angela’s in any more danger?”

“I don’t think so. They had their chance tonight if they wanted to do anything more to her. But she’s old enough to make up her own mind and I’ll talk to her about it. If she wants to get away for a while, she can. I’d promised her a trip to Europe soon anyway. If she wants she can take off as soon as she feels up to it.”

“So both burglary and kidnapping seem improbable,” Uncle Am said. “You know what that leaves?”

“Sure. Me. Probably a pair of hired hoods—judging from how lousy they were.”

“Consider yourself lucky they *were* lousy. But you don’t know anyone who

wants you out of the way?"

"Honest to God, Am, I don't. I'll do some thinking about it, but let's leave it at that till I've had time to. Let's forget possible motives and stick to facts."

"Any fact in particular?" Uncle Am asked.

Dolan nodded. "The fact that those men got in here tonight. They didn't break in, and they didn't pick a lock. Those locks are good ones, not the kind you can open with a piece of celluloid, or even an ordinary picklock. Besides, there are no scratches on either of them; I looked.

"So they had a key. Or were let in by someone already inside. Either of which amounts to the same thing. I'm not saying it was an inside job—but it *could* have an inside angle, like one of the servants having been bribed to lend them a key to have duplicated. I'm not saying that I think that's what happened, but I want the possibility checked on. That's your first job, Am—yours and Ed's, I mean. It's the only thing I see right now, in fact, that you might be able to get your teeth into."

I asked, "Do you have any reason to suspect any particular one of the servants?"

"Yes and no. The maid, Elsie, would be the most likely because she's been here such a short time, only a couple of weeks. She could even have been planted here. Another thing on my agenda is to have a talk with Mrs. Anderson and find out how she employed the girl, through an employment agency or what. And what she knows about her—me, I don't even know her last name. That'll give you something to work on. And—has she seen either one of you?"

Uncle Am shook his head. I said, "She let me in this afternoon when I came to keep my appointment with your wife and I saw her tonight."

"Then that lets you out of any shadowing, Ed. But you, Am, can see what she does on her next day off. I don't even know which day that is.

"And Robert Sideco. He's been with me four years. I hired him myself and know he wasn't put in here as a spy or a plant. He'd been houseboy for a friend of mine who died—and the friend wasn't in the rackets, and Robert had worked for him at least five years. But that doesn't mean he couldn't have been bought, recently.

"His day off is Friday, day after tomorrow—or tomorrow, if we're calling this Thursday. He's seen you both so neither of you can take up the tail job on him, but if you want to sublet that to a Starlock operative, you may. I'd like to know where he goes, who he sees, and how much money he spends. I don't know what can be done about investigating him beyond that."

I made a suggestion. "Something in his room might give us a lead. Bankbooks, letters, whatever we might find. You could send him on an errand and give one of us a chance to take a look."

"Good idea, Ed. It'll be you, though, and not your uncle. Am, you stay clear of here after tonight. As long as nobody here knows you by sight except Angela and Robert we'll keep it that way, in case. I especially don't want

Elsie to get to know you.”

“And Mrs. Anderson? Do we check on her?”

“I—” Dolan hesitated. “Hell, I don’t think so. Not right away anyway. She’s been with us so long and is so near to being a member of the family that I’d almost as soon suspect Mike or Angela. Or Sylvia. It’s really reaching for me to picture anybody trying to buy her, let alone succeeding.

“Anyway, we’ll take the other two first. And hope that before we get desperate enough to think about far-out chances like Mrs. Anderson, some more likely possibilities for investigation will have presented themselves.”

He looked at his watch. “Well, shall we call it a night and get a few hours’ sleep?”

“Fine,” Uncle Am said. “Any special time you’ll want us to be ready tomorrow?”

“Come to think of it, noon should be early enough for you two. I’ve got things to do earlier, but they’re not ones you can help on. I won’t be ready for either of you to do anything before noon.”

Uncle Am said, “All right. We’ll be at the office by noon, and wait for a call from you.”

“Why the office? Just stay in your room until you hear from me; it’ll be handier. And I’ll call between twelve and one. For the next few days at least—say the rest of this week—I’d rather you’d consider yourselves working for me even if you’re only waiting for a call. That way there’ll be no danger of your taking another job and not being available if and when I should want you on short notice.”

As we stood up, Dolan glanced down at the three guns lying on his desk, the two thirty-two automatics he’d lent to Uncle Am and me and the extra gun, the forty-five automatic, that Steck had brought and hadn’t taken away with him. “Want to borrow two of these?” he asked.

Uncle Am looked at me to pass the buck for an answer, and I said, “We’d rather have our own. I’ll go down to the office and get them tomorrow before noon.”

Dolan nodded. “I’ll let you out.”

He walked to the door with us and we heard the bolt slide shut as we went down the three steps to the sidewalk. Fortress Dolan was closed for the night.

We turned east on the deserted sidewalk. Uncle Am said, “Well?”

“No comment,” I said. “I’m too tired to think any more tonight.”

But halfway there I changed my mind. “Uncle Am,” I said, “I think I’d rather go to the office tonight and get those guns than wait till tomorrow. Not that I think we’ll need them sooner; I’d just rather get it over with and sleep half an hour later whenever I do get to sleep.”

He yawned. “Okay, kid. I’ll go with you if you want me to.

“No use both of us going. Get some sleep.”

He nodded without answering, and when we reached the rooming house we said good night and he turned in. I went on to our garage and got the

Buick. At that time of night, with no traffic and all the traffic lights just flashing yellows, it took only five minutes to park it in front of the old building where our office is. I hiked up the steps, since the elevator wasn't running, and got our guns and holsters.

Both of us like revolvers and hate automatics, which is one reason why we'd turned down Dolan's guns. With an automatic you have to remember whether or not you have a cartridge jacked up in the chamber, you have to check whether the safety's on, and you can never be sure whether it's going to jam after the first shot. That's three strikes on automatics, as far as we're concerned, and puts them out. Our guns are almost identical snub-nosed thirty-eight revolvers, mine a Colt Detective Special and his an S&W. Our only serious difference of opinion is on choice of holsters; I prefer a shoulder holster and he wears one on his belt.

When I got home, thinking Uncle Am might be asleep already, I let myself in as quietly as possible. But the springs creaked as he turned over and said, "Hi, kid. I've been wondering something."

"What?"

"Who put the 'lectric eel in Mrs. Murphy's fishing creel?"

"I don't know," I said. "Who put the Vaseline on Mrs. Murphy's trampoline?"

"Damn if I don't like that better. Especially as I had to mispronounce 'electric' to make mine come out. Still feel like 'no comment' on the Dolan bit?"

"Well," I said, "I think it would be better for us to sleep on it, but if you've got any bright thought I'll be glad to listen to it."

"The opposite of a bright thought, Ed. All I've got is an unbright feeling that there's something about it I don't like but can't put my finger on."

"I know what you mean. Let's sleep on it."

I was down to shorts and was getting ready to turn off the dim light Uncle Am had left on and get into bed when he said, "Just a minute, kid."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe I'm too tired to sleep. How'd you go for a nightcap? If I recall aright, there was some whiskey left in that bottle."

"Plenty of it," I said. "And okay, I'll have one too." I turned on the overhead light and started to make a pair of drinks. "And how about a game of gin rummy while we drink it?"

He sat up in bed. "If you're not kidding, fine. What time is it?"

"I'm not kidding. Get the cards set up while I finish these drinks. And the time will be four-thirty when you hear the sound of whiskey being poured."

"Good. We can play till five, set the alarm for eleven, and have six hours' sleep. Besides the one hour we got in before the excitement." He was out of bed and setting up the card table by the time he'd finished talking.

I brought over the drinks and we cut for deal. I won it, and while I was shuffling Uncle Am said, "One more thing about the Dolan case."

“Can’t it wait?”

“It can, but it’s a happy thought and doesn’t want to. It’s about money. I quoted Dolan our top rate of a hundred a day, apiece. Through Saturday, and he’s booked us that far, we’ll have put in four days apiece and that’s eight hundred bucks.”

“Plus a rake-off on a Starlock op if we use one. With professional discount Ben Starlock will give us a *good* shadow op for fifty—and we can’t put him down for less than the rate we’re charging for ourselves.”

“Even without that it’ll be a damn good week.”

I finished dealing but didn’t pick up my hand. “And there’s one thing that we should get ourselves out of it.”

“What’s that?”

“We should sign up with a telephone answering service. Look at all the phone calls we may lose the next three days, since we’ll be operating from here instead of there.”

“Sold,” Uncle Am said. “We’ll make arrangements our first free day. Leo Kahn in the next office to ours has an answering service. We’ll find out what the score is from him. Now deal.”

I dealt. I was thinking that I hoped Molly Czerwinski, or whatever her name was if she used her married one, wouldn’t call and keep calling until she gave up on us. Not that the job she had to offer us, hunting an ex-husband who owed her a couple of thousand on a property settlement, was anything to get excited about, but it would be nice to see her again.

We got in two games by five o’clock and I won both of them, for a little over four hundred dollars. We decided to call it a night then; I set the alarm for eleven and we turned in. I went to sleep the minute my head hit the pillow.

Chapter Fourteen

I was dreaming a crazy mixed-up dream in which Mike Dolan wasn't Mike Dolan at all, but a midget in disguise as Dolan's son, who had Robert Sideco on his payroll and was conspiring to steal Sylvia Dolan's liquor supply. But I'd found them out and Robert, dressed in a gaudy patterned silk robe over even gaudier pajamas, was coming after me with a machete, and I was running, running like hell because I was unarmed, down a deserted Huron Street, but my broken rib was hurting like hell and he was gaining on me and I could hear the swish of the machete as it swung and missed the back of my neck by an inch.

But before he could swing again I was saved by the bell of the alarm clock.

My rib hurt when I sat up to turn it off; somehow I'd been sleeping on my side with my hand under my rib cage at just the right spot, or the wrong spot, whichever way you look at it.

I asked Uncle Am if he was awake, and he yawned and said he was. While the dream was fresh in my mind I told him I had the solution to the Dolan case, and what it was. He laughed and swung his feet out of bed.

He said, "Ed, let's get dressed fast without shaving and get a pair of big breakfasts. When we do hear from Dolan we might have to take off right away and not get a chance to eat till evening."

I said that was a good idea and we followed through with it. We got back before twelve and took turns, one of us staying in the room by the phone, while the other went down the hall to the bathroom to wash and shave. But the phone call didn't come until half-past twelve and we were both ready by then.

Uncle Am took the call when it came; we haven't any extension phone in the room, of course, so I couldn't listen in. But Uncle Am didn't say much more than yes a few times and then cradled the phone.

He said, "He wants to talk to both of us and he doesn't want me to come there because if the maid sees me I'm dead as far as tailing her is concerned. So he's coming here, be here in ten minutes or so."

"My God," I said. "Let's do a fast job of straightening up. I'll make the beds; you do the rest of it." We did a ten-minute job of making the room look presentable, and then I remembered that while Dolan had our address he wouldn't know which room to come to, so I said I'd wait for him downstairs.

I didn't have to go all the way down; he came in as I was nearing the bottom of the stairs, just about the point from which I'd taken my header Monday evening.

I showed him up to our room and we put him in the most comfortable chair, Uncle Am's. He looked tired and sounded tired; he probably hadn't had much sleep.

He said, "I'll take things one by one. Mike. I called the psychologist early to call off our date with him. Then I called the boys' camp in Wisconsin and made sure it would be all right for him to get there early and it was. He's on his way there now with two of my boys whom I fully trust. Haven't called his school yet; I'll get around to that tomorrow. Then I—"

"In your car?" I interrupted.

"No, I had one of the boys rent one. But why?"

"A thought I had. If someone's out to get you and can't get at you otherwise, a car bomb is always a possibility."

"Good idea and I hadn't thought of it. All right, so I won't use my car for a few days at least and I'll check it over before I step on the starter the first time. Or still better, I'll ask Cap Brandt if he can have someone from the bomb squad vet it for me. He'd know all the places to look and how to do it without setting off anything. Thanks, Ed.

"While we're on Brandt, I talked to him on the phone and gave him a rough idea of things, got an appointment with him late this afternoon to go into details. Incidentally, I mentioned you two; he not only remembers you but spoke highly of you. So.

"Now the maid. Elsie Aykers, A-y-k-e-r-s. I talked to Mrs. Anderson about her, and a few questions about Robert too. I decided suspecting Mrs. A *was* too far out so I took her partly into my confidence, enough so I could ask questions freely."

He pulled a notebook out of his pocket, tore a page out of it, and handed it over to me. "That first line is the address she gave, but I don't know if it means anything now. I mean, it might have been just a room that she gave up when she got the live-in job. Or it might be a permanent address, her family if she's got one.

"Name and address of the employment agency Mrs. A. got her from, in the Loop. Says she's got maids from there before. Maybe they'll show you her application form. If they won't cooperate, call Cap Brandt and let him talk to them, then they'll talk to you. Mrs. A. says she didn't check any references; she took the employment agency's word on that. If you can get those references from the application blank, check on them yourself if they're local ones; even if the agency tells you they checked, maybe they didn't. All clear?"

I nodded and he said, "Okay, Ed, that's your job for this afternoon. You can start on it as soon as we break up here.

"Am, your job is to tail her. Not on her day off; I'm firing her late this afternoon. One thing I did this morning was account for all seven sets of keys—and she didn't have hers; everybody else did. So I'm simply not taking a chance on keeping her.

"When I sent her to get her keys from her purse and show them to me, she came back and said they were gone. She says she had them as recently as Monday, the last time she went out, and hasn't the faintest idea how she could have lost them.

"Maybe so, but I'm not going to take a chance on having her around after today. Not even tonight. If she gave or loaned those keys to someone, then she's also capable of letting that someone in from the inside and the bolts won't mean anything. But in case I'm firing her unfairly I'll make up for it by giving her two weeks' pay ahead—and that's damn fair since she's worked for us only two and a half weeks."

"It is," I said. "But how come you don't fire her right away? Why the wait?"

"I want to give you, Ed, a chance to check at that address without running into her there, since she knows you. And the employment agency, too; she just might head right there to reregister. I mean she might if I let her go early this afternoon while the agency would still be open."

He turned to Uncle Am. "Tell you what, Am. I'll let it go till after dinner; we eat early and we'll be through by seven. I'll call her into my study then and do the job. I'll give her some reason for this—I don't know what but I'll think of one—but I'll make the extra two weeks' salary contingent on her leaving right away. She'll have to pack up, of course, but that shouldn't take her long; Mrs. A. says she came with only one suitcase. So you can count on her leaving by the front door—nobody walks through the back alley after dark—any time between ten minutes after seven and half-past.

"I can't guarantee whether she'll leave afoot and walk over to Clark Street for a bus or phone for a cab. You can be ready either way?"

Uncle Am nodded.

"So much for Elsie. Now, Robert Sideco. As I told you, tomorrow is his day off. Mrs. A. tells me his day-off habits are regular and we can count on them. He sleeps a little later than usual and comes to the kitchen for breakfast about nine o'clock. After breakfast he leaves, by the front door, and gets back late evening.

"You can arrange for a Starlock operative to be waiting to pick him up around nine-thirty tomorrow morning?"

Uncle Am nodded again. "And I'm free between now and seven? Or do you want me to stay here, on call?"

"Umm—guess there's no need for that."

"Okay, if something should come up I'll probably be at the office. I'd rather spend the afternoon there instead of here; there are some things I can do there that I can't do here."

"Fine." Dolan stood up. "If either of you runs into anything startling or even suspicious call me as soon as you can reach me. Otherwise—well, I'll get in touch with you tomorrow morning for your reports. Probably after ten; I'll keep going today and this evening, but I may want to sleep late

tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Uncle Am said. “But about the tail job on the maid. Is that for this evening only, or shall I take it up again tomorrow? Like as not tonight she’ll go right home and stay there; if she does that, I won’t learn much.”

“Good idea. Yes, stay on it tomorrow, especially if you don’t learn much tonight.”

I said, “If he does that, I’ll have his report on tonight ready to relay to you when you phone. Want me to be here when you call tomorrow morning, or at the office?”

“Don’t suppose it matters, Ed. As you wish. If I can’t reach you at one number, I’ll try the other. Well, good luck.”

He left and I walked with him to the head of the stairs and then came back.

Uncle Am said, “Works out fine, Ed. I can even pay the parking fine and send in the Phoenix report; I thought I’d have to let both of them go till Monday, at least. And I’ll call Starlock and set up the Sideco tail for tomorrow. And at least start due process on getting an answering service.”

“Okay,” I said. “Come on.”

Uncle Am said, “Wait a minute. Let’s take our guns.”

“Why? We won’t need them today, with either of the jobs we have to do.”

“Kid, from here on, while we’re on this case, we’d better carry them. Otherwise if we’re at the office and want them they’ll be here at home and if we want them here—like we did last night—they’ll be at the office. Someday when we’re feeling rich enough we’ll have two each place, but for now let’s keep ‘em with us and not get caught short again.”

He was putting his belt holster on while he talked, and I took off my suit coat long enough to put on my shoulder holster under it. Then we left.

Walking toward our garage, I said, “You won’t want the car at least until seven. I’ll—”

He interrupted. “I won’t want it then, Ed. For a tail job like tonight’s, I’d rather use Harry Main, or some other cabby.”

Harry Main is a taxi driver whom we know and always use, if he’s free and we can get him, for the kinds of surveillance jobs where a taxi works out better than a private car. Which is usually the case if your quarry is likely to be traveling in taxis himself. If you’re in a private car following someone in a taxi and he has himself let out in heavy traffic in the middle of the Loop, you’ve got a chance in a hundred of getting your own car parked in time not to lose him. Of course you can abandon your car in the middle of the street, but the police frown on the practice. If you’re following his taxi in another taxi, there’s no problem.

Uncle Am said, “You take our car, drop me off at the courthouse, and go on. I’ll take care of the parking ticket and take a cab back to the office.”

So we did it that way. That put me a lot nearer the employment agency than the home address, which was fairly far south. I cruised around the block three times looking for a parking place before I gave up and put the car on a

parking lot. My time was worth a hundred dollars a day of Dolan's dough right now, and it wasn't fair of me to spend half an hour of it to try to save a fifty-cent parking-lot fee.

The only hitch at the employment agency was that the manager was out to lunch and nobody there would take the authority of showing me an application, so I had to wait forty minutes for him to come back. But when he finally did show up he was reasonable and cooperative and immediately sent for and showed me Elsie Aykers' application, dated the middle of May, three weeks ago, and the file card on her.

The file card didn't show anything except the fact that she'd been sent to the Dolan home and how much she'd been charged for the referral. The application form showed more, and I copied from it the facts that I didn't already have. Her employment record showed three jobs, all as maid, in the past two years, giving all three of her former employers as references. She was younger than I'd guessed, only twenty; and she was a high school graduate, which accounted for her employment record going back only two years. An initial on the file card told the manager which of his women had interviewed Elsie Aykers and he called her in; but she didn't remember Elsie personally so that didn't get us anywhere. I asked her if she checked on references and she said yes, that they always called the most recent employer and then spot-checked by calling one of the others because some of the applicants had employment records a page long and they couldn't possibly check on all of them.

The manager wanted to know if I knew anything against Elsie, in case she ever came in to reregister, and I told him no, that it was just a routine matter in which she was being checked on along with a number of other people.

I thanked him and left, bought my car back from the parking lot for six bits, and drove south to the address Elsie had given on the application blank. I was glad, for Uncle Am's sake, to find it was in a mixed neighborhood. It's rough on a white operative to have to hang around an all-colored neighborhood for any length of time, because he can attract so much attention that he does more harm than good.

The address turned out to be a fairly neat little bungalow; with a coat of paint it would have been quite nice-looking if it had some space around it instead of being jammed so closely between two store fronts. It had a half-porch four steps up, and on the porch a middle-aged colored man in his shirt sleeves was sitting in a rocking chair reading a newspaper. I went up two of the four steps, and he lowered the newspaper and looked at me. I asked him if a Miss Elsie Aykers lived here.

He said that she did and didn't live here; this was her family home but she had a live-in job and got home only once a week on her day off. He told me he was Elsie's poppa and could he know what I wanted to see her about.

I could have spun him a yarn that would have let me ask more questions, but I decided it wasn't worth it, that if there *was* anything bad to learn about

Elsie, I wasn't about to learn it from her poppa, and it was better to make an exit without arousing any suspicion that might make Uncle Am's job harder. So I said I was representing a secretarial school and that one of Elsie's high school teachers had given me Elsie's name, among others, as that of a girl who was bright enough to get into office work, that the teacher had heard Elsie was working as a maid and thought she should do better than that. He set me back on my heels a little by becoming quite interested and wanting details like how long would it take her and how much the course would cost. I ducked categorical answers by saying it depended on how many courses she'd want to take and how many hours a day she'd want to put in and said that if he'd tell me what Elsie's day off was I'd rather come back and I could explain all the details to her direct and he could listen in. He told me her next day off was Monday, and I said I'd be back then, some time in the afternoon, and got away.

It began to look to me as though Elsie was just what she seemed to be, unless Uncle Am should come up with something by tracing her to a thieves' den or an opium joint, but I still had her three references to check out by phone.

It was about half-past three when I got to the office. Uncle Am wanted to know what gave but agreed to wait until I could call the references. I was lucky enough to find the lady of the house at home my first try on all three calls.

Elsie's employment record checked out with her application. Even the dates, as far as her former employers could remember them. That's the most important thing to watch for on checking references. If an application says the applicant worked the first half of such and such a year for one employer and the second half for another, and you find out she worked only four months for each one of them, then there's four months unaccounted for, and during that time she may have had one or two other jobs from which she was dismissed for stealing or for being caught in bed with her mistress's teen-age son, or what have you. But Elsie hadn't been between jobs for more than a week or two at any time.

So that was all I could do about Elsie from what I had to work with. So I told Uncle Am the score to date and he told me what he'd done. He'd paid the fine, mailed the Phoenix report, and had completed negotiations to have the answering service start Monday.

He had also called Starlock and arranged to have one of Ben's operatives pick up Robert Sideco whenever, after nine o'clock tomorrow morning, and stay with him till he came home again. And he'd located Harry Main at home and had arranged for Harry to pick him up in front of Ireland's Restaurant on Clark Street at six-forty-five. Since I'd dropped him off at the courthouse Uncle Am had been fully as busy as I had been.

He said, "I'm caught up with everything I can do now, Ed. But I'm going to stay here another couple of hours till half-past five and then go to Ireland's

for some lobster thermidor. You're free the rest of the day if you want, or you can stick around and play some gin and eat with me."

I said I'd stick around and go to eat with him, but that I'd thought of a call I'd like to make. It probably wouldn't lead to anything, but it wouldn't hurt to try.

I called Captain Brandt at police headquarters, and got him. I told him who I was and asked if he'd have two names run through the files for me to see if there was a record for either one. I said it was in connection with the Dolan case, which is why I didn't want to make inquiry through the channels I'd ordinarily use.

"Sure," he said. "Do they work for Dolan?"

"Yes, as servants. I'm just checking them out for him. Elsie Aykers, A-y-k-e-r-s, and Robert Sideco. Maid and houseboy at Dolan's home."

I gave him our phone number and he said he'd call back as soon as he had a report.

Uncle Am had the cards out and the top of his desk cleared off when I went into the inner office. We always used it for our card playing so if a customer should walk in he wouldn't catch us at it.

We played only one hand when the phone rang. It was Brandt and he'd had the names run through. There was no record for Elsie Aykers, which didn't surprise me, but there was one charge against Sideco.

Ten years ago, at which time he'd given his age as nineteen and his occupation as busboy, he'd been picked up on a C.C.W.—carrying concealed weapons—charge after a gang rumble on the South Side. The rumble had been between a gang of Negro youths and a gang of mixed Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Filipino kids, mostly teenagers. The rumble was over by the time the police got there. But they'd picked up a few casualties—no fatalities—and had gone on to pick up and shake down any teenagers that could have been in either gang whom they found loose in the neighborhood. Sideco had been in the haul, and they'd found him in possession of a switchblade knife two inches longer than the law allowed. But they hadn't been able to prove that he belonged to the Spanish-speaking gang—the Matadors, they called themselves—or that he had participated in the rumble. Since it was his first offense they'd given him a three-month suspended sentence and six months probation on the C.C.W. charge. He hadn't been arrested since.

He said, "Dolan's coming in to see me at four o'clock, and I'll pass that on to him, for what it's worth, but it doesn't sound like much. Want him to call you?"

I said, "Not unless he wants to, for some reason. But you can tell him that Am and I are both at the office in case he needs us."

Dolan didn't call us, which meant there'd been no new developments. On the gin I stayed ahead, and for a while it looked as though I was going to crack the thousand-dollar barrier and we'd have a night out on Uncle Am; once I got as close as nine hundred and twenty-some dollars and another game

would have put me over. But I lost the next two games before I won another, and when we quit at half-past five to go to Ireland's I was seven hundred dollars ahead. It's an old, old restaurant and it's in a crummy neighborhood, namely ours, but it's one of the best seafood restaurants in the Middle West.

It was easier to put the Buick in our garage and walk the few blocks to the restaurant than to hunt for a parking place on Clark Street so I did it that way. We had ourselves a good feed, and at a few minutes before six-forty-five we paid the check and went outside to wait for Harry Main. He came along on time to the minute, and Uncle Am got in the cab and I started strolling toward home. I stopped in a drugstore and picked up a few paperbacks to read.

When I got home I decided to call Dolan to let him know I'd be in the room all evening in case he thought of anything, but then I realized it was seven o'clock and if he was on schedule he'd be firing Elsie Aykers at this very moment. So I waited till half-past seven to call but didn't get any answer. I tried the listed number then. Robert answered it and put Dolan on when I asked for him.

I said I wanted to tell him a thing or two, nothing important, but that we could talk more freely if he went to his study and called our home number from there. He said, "If you're home, Ed, why not drop over?"

I went across. Dolan was waiting at the door and let me in; I noticed that he had to unbolt the door to do so, and he bolted it again after me. He said, "New rule of the house, till I get the locks changed, which I haven't got around to yet. Even I am to be bolted out whenever I leave. Nobody leaves without someone going to the door with him and throwing the bolt."

We went into his study and closed the door. He asked if I wanted a drink but I turned it down. I asked if Elsie had left on schedule and he nodded. "I talked to her and let her go at seven. First time I really talked to her and she turned out to be a kind of nice gal, took it all right and said she understood, thanked me for the extra two weeks' pay. I found myself sorry to do it, but with her having 'lost' her keys at just that time, I simply couldn't take a chance on her staying around."

I said, "My hunch, for what it's worth, is that she's on the level and did either lose those keys or have them lifted from her purse without her knowledge. *Could* they have been stolen from her outside the house?"

"According to her story, yes. Turns out that the last time she's *sure* she had them was last Saturday. Mrs. A. sent her on an errand then and she used a key to let herself in when she came back. The only time she was out since then was Monday all day, her day off. When she got back that evening Mike was just ahead of her, coming back from seeing a neighborhood movie, and used his key so she didn't have to look for hers. So, if she's telling the truth, her keys could have been lost or stolen any time after Saturday—and outside the house, yes, any time Monday."

"Did she phone for a cab when she left?"

"No. I imagine she walked over to Clark and took a bus there."

That's what Uncle Am would have figured, I knew, and he'd have kept his taxi and used it to follow the bus she took. Which is much better technique than his dismissing Harry and having to get on the same bus she took.

I told him what I'd done that afternoon, my stop at the employment agency, my brief talk with her father, and how closely her references checked out. I asked him if Brandt had told him about my call and about Robert's record, such as it was.

He nodded. "Which doesn't worry me. Hell, I carried a switchblade myself, in my teens. In the neighborhood I grew up in, you damn near *had* to because everybody else did."

"I'd say that record is a plus factor in clearing him."

"How, Ed?"

"If he got even a suspended sentence, that means he was fingerprinted. And that means he can't have a record under any other name, or his prints would have been matched with it."

"Good thinking, and I wouldn't have thought of it. Well—any questions, while we're talking anyway? There's no hurry, but I've got to leave for a few hours."

"There's one thing we've never gone into. The *cui bono* bit, who would benefit directly by your death? I presume you have a will. Is anybody outside your family mentioned importantly?"

"Not importantly. Mrs. Anderson's down for five thousand, no more than she has coming for ten years' service. Robert's down for a thousand. But neither of them knows about it.

"Outside of that—I might as well tell you. I made a new will only six months ago, Ed, and it's fairly complicated. It had to be because I wanted to protect Mike against the possibility of Sylvia's going overboard into alcoholism, in which case I wouldn't want her to have continued custody of him, for his sake.

"My lawyer and I—and he's the executor—worked it out this way. A trust fund is set up that would give Sylvia two hundred a week for life whatever happens. The rest of the estate is divided equally between Angela and Mike. Angela would get hers in a lump sum, of course. Mike's share is in the form of another trust fund that would pay him an income till he's twenty-one and then, in a lump sum, whatever would be left. As long as Sylvia has custody of him she'd have control of his income and she'd do all right. But if she should go overboard or for any reason become unfit as a mother, the lawyer is to act as Angela's attorney and institute proceedings to have Mike's custody taken away from Sylvia and given to Angela.

"I hope that would never happen; it would hurt Mike plenty if it did. But it would hurt him worse to be brought up by an overboard-alcoholic mother.

"Incidentally, both Sylvia and Angela know about this and agree to it. I had to talk it out with both of them so I'd know that Angela would agree to sue for Mike's custody if necessary, and I wanted Sylvia to understand what would

happen if she should let it become necessary.

“Well, Ed, I’ve got to leave. I’ll phone for a taxi—I’m taking your advice about using my car until a boy from the bomb squad looks it over. Cap Brandt’s sending someone tomorrow.

“But I’ll let you out before I phone.”

He walked to the door with me and let me out. I heard the bolt slide shut behind me. Even for the short interval between my leaving and a taxi coming in answer to his call he was bolting it, taking no chances. And he was going armed, even inside his own house. Once, as he’d sat down at his desk, his coat had flipped back enough to let me see that he was wearing a shoulder holster.

Chapter Fifteen

At home I read for a while and then remembered something and called the Dolan number again. Again Robert answered it, and this time I asked for Angela. She came on the phone a couple of minutes later.

“Ed Hunter, Angela,” I said. “I’m ashamed of myself. I was over there and talked to your father about an hour ago, and completely forgot to ask him how you’re feeling. So I’ll ask you instead.”

“I’m feeling fine, Ed. I stayed home today and will probably stay home tomorrow, but just because of appearances. My jaw is still swollen, but it’s starting to go down and shouldn’t show by day after tomorrow. And by then the area of black eye should be down to the point where sunglasses will cover it.”

“Good,” I said.

“It’s probably for the best. Exams are coming up soon on my classes at the University and it gives me a chance to study up for them. I’ll probably pass with flying colors instead of just-average grades. Thanks for calling.”

And we said good-bys and I went back to reading.

I got sleepy around eleven and turned in. I didn’t turn on the dim light; I wanted to be awake when Uncle Am came home. But he came before I got to sleep anyway, only ten minutes later. I sat up and turned on the bed lamp.

“Who put the turpentine in Mrs. Murphy’s sherry wine?” he wanted to know.

I said, “Who poured a pot of glue in Mrs. Murphy’s Irish stew? And neither of those is very brilliant, so let’s call it a draw. Anything happen?”

“A big fat nothing. She went home and stayed there. Nobody came in or out. Lights went off about ten-fifteen; I waited another fifteen minutes and came home. Anything new this end?”

“Not much. I had another talk with Dolan. Called to let him know I’d be here in the room all evening and he told me to drop over. I brought up the *cui bono* angle, and he told me about his will.”

Uncle Am was hanging up his coat. “Okay, tell me about it while I get ready for bed.”

I told him about Dolan’s will and then asked him what his guess was as to how much Dolan was worth.

He shrugged. “A guess is all it would be, Ed. But it wouldn’t be peanuts. Maybe a quarter of a million, maybe half a million. You don’t set up trust funds out of an estate much smaller than that.”

The phone rang and I was nearest so I took it. It was Dolan. "Just got home," he said, "and when the taxi took me past your place I saw there was a light still on in your room. Is Am home yet?"

"Just got here," I said. "Nothing. She went home and stayed home. Want to talk to him?"

"Not if that's all he has to report. Tell him to stay on it. Those missing keys are about the only thing we have to work on. I want to find out what that girl does, whether she reregisters with an employment agency and takes another job, or maybe rests up a few days and blows town. He can stay on it weeks if necessary. If it does run any length of time and he wants a day off, though, tell him to use a Starlock operative for relief."

"Okay," I said. "And—I should have asked you this while we were talking, but what about me tomorrow? Still want me on standby even if neither of us thinks of anything I can do?"

"Yes, tomorrow and Saturday. And maybe longer, I don't know yet. Ed, I know it sounds foolish to pay you a hundred bucks a day for maybe doing nothing, but until I learn what this threat is and can take care of it, money's simply no object."

"Right," I said. "And at that price it includes my being available evenings too. But is it okay if I spend days at the office and evenings here in the room?"

"Sure, just so I can reach you one place or the other. Except for time out to eat, of course. Well, good night, Ed."

I told Uncle Am everything Dolan had said and he shook his head sadly. "Damn it, kid, I hope we can come up with *something* for him. I feel like we're stealing his money, so far."

I said, "We've done everything he's asked us to do, and as well as we could do it. What time do you figure on starting your stake-out tomorrow?"

"I think nine's safe enough. I doubt if she'd leave earlier than that. And, now that I know the neighborhood, I'm taking the Buick. I told Harry Main I wouldn't need him any more when I paid him off. Which reminds me, paying him off left me a little short. Know how much is in the petty cash box at the office?"

"An even hundred," I said.

"I'll pick it up in the morning. When you go down for lunch you can drop by the bank and cash a check. Another hundred—or more if you want to draw some yourself."

We got our first normal night's sleep since Monday night, and Am dropped me at the office the next morning.

I took the cover off the typewriter and got to work. I'd decided that I wasn't going to sit on my fanny doing nothing today and tomorrow, not all the time anyway, even if I was getting paid for it.

Dolan hadn't said he wanted written reports, but I figured that since I had plenty of time that Dolan was paying for anyway, I might as well make use of it by writing them up. I started with Mike's arrival at our room Tuesday

evening, even though technically I hadn't been working for Dolan at that moment. I put in everything except, of course, my side trip with Angela later that evening. Leaving that out, even the innocent part of it, didn't matter because, although I'd learned from her quite a bit about the Dolan family relationships, that was all stuff that Dolan himself knew even better than I did.

Aside from that I put in every bit of detail I could, even my various conversations by phone and in person with Dolan himself, not so much because they'd interest him as because I hoped going through everything again might clarify my own thinking and let me see something I'd missed before. It didn't; I was still as much in the dark when I'd finished as when I'd started. But it killed the morning; it was almost noon when I finished.

The phone rang while I was reading it over; it was Dick Barth of Great Lakes Finance Company with a small job for us. But as usual it had to be done no later than tomorrow or not at all so I had to turn it down. But I gave him an explanation that kept him happy so he'd call us again sometime, and I told him that as of Monday we'd have an answering service and he agreed that it was a good idea.

I finished reading what I'd just written, and by then it was a few minutes of twelve. I went down and had lunch and got money from the bank.

Back at the office I started in on writing up Uncle Am's reports for him. That was easier because there was no point in making overlapping reports where we'd both been in on the same bit. I'd itemized my own expenses on my own reports, such as they were—I hadn't spent much—but I couldn't list his because I hadn't asked how much he'd spent on taxis tailing Sylvia Dolan or how much Harry Main had charged him for last night. But outside of that our reports were up to date now.

The phone rang about two o'clock, and it was Ben Starlock.

He said, "Let me talk fast, Ed, and give me a fast answer. Our boy on Sideco just phoned in. He's outside a pool hall on Halsted that Sideco entered ten minutes ago. He dropped in five minutes later but just bought a pack of cigarettes and left again when he saw it was strictly a *se habla español* place; he'd have been the only Anglo there and would have stuck out like a sore thumb if he'd tried to stick around inside. Just Mexicans and Filipinos. But he did see that Sideco had his hat and coat hung up and was playing pool. Which means he may well be there all afternoon.

"So Pete Garcia's here in the back room doing nothing. He can get there in a cab in ten minutes, maybe even get to play pool with Sideco and rope him a little. What say?"

"Will he be able to identify Sideco from any other Filipinos that are there?"

Starlock laughed. "Healy says he's wearing a lavender silk shirt, blue suspenders, and a yellow bowtie. Doubt if anybody else there has that exact combination."

I didn't hesitate, knowing Dolan's expense-no-object attitude; I said, "Shoot him there fast. Then call me back."

The phone rang again a few minutes later and it was Starlock calling back. He said, "Pete's on his way. What else did you want to ask, Ed?"

I said, "Am's on a tail job of his own and I forgot to ask him this. Did he make any arrangements to get a report from your operative—from Healy since he's the one doing it—tonight after he takes Sideco back home and drops him?"

"No, he didn't. Shall I tell him to if he calls in again?"

"It's not life or death, but he might as well. Unless something pops I'll be home all evening and Healy knows where we live. It's only a block from where he'll drop off Sideco, so tell him to drop up to the room if our light's on."

"Will do," Ben said.

There were two other calls that afternoon, both in the half hour before five o'clock. The first was from Ben Starlock: Pete Garcia had just got back and hadn't anything important to report, except that Sideco was a pretty good pool player. But he, Sideco, had played in the same foursome all afternoon so Pete hadn't been able to get into a game with him or talk to him. He'd been able to observe though that the foursome hadn't been gambling, unless you could call playing for two bits a game gambling.

Sideco had left at four-fifteen, and Garcia, leaving Healy to take over, had phoned Ben from the pool hall to see if there were any further instructions. Ben had told him to give Healy my message if he could catch up with him outside, and Pete had managed to do so.

The other call, just before five, was from Dolan. First he asked if I'd had any intermediate reports, either from Am or from the operative following Sideco. I told him there'd been nothing from Am, but I passed on to him the bit that had come in about Sideco.

He said he'd done one thing himself: he'd cased Robert's room. What he'd found there hadn't been suspicious but it had surprised him. Sideco was amazingly solvent for his circumstances, but his solvency was on the up and up and accounted for. He'd found a tin box—locked, but easily opened and relocked with a bent paper clip—with all of Robert's records, including copies of his income tax returns, for eight years back. Bankbooks for that period showed he'd banked an exact twenty dollars each and every week, which alone would have given him eight thousand dollars over eight years. But there was a lot more than that because every once in a while he'd drawn money, usually about a thousand at a time, from the bank and invested it in stocks—and the *right* stocks. His 1959 return, for instance, showed a capital gain of six thousand dollars on American Motors stock alone. He'd bought a thousand dollars' worth in 1958 at ten and had sold it near the top in 1959 for seventy. He'd had a few capital losses but not many. At the moment, in addition to a few thousand still in the bank, Dolan said, he estimated Robert's current portfolio of stocks and bonds to be worth close to thirty thousand dollars. "The son of a gun," he said, and laughed. "Next time I want a tip on the

market I'll know where to go for it." We both agreed that while Robert's surprising degree of solvency, considering his job, didn't rule him out as a suspect, it certainly diminished the possibility of his being involved in anything crooked; and if he was it would hardly have been for any small bribe from outside.

I left the office at five, had some dinner, and went home to spend another evening reading. I was getting a bit fed up with doing nothing and would have muchly preferred to see a show, get drunk, do something, anything—even relieving Uncle Am on the tail job if Elsie's knowing me hadn't precluded my doing that—but as long as Dolan was paying me a hundred bucks a day just to stand by, then doing nothing was the least I could do to earn the money.

John Healy showed up about ten o'clock with a pretty dull report on Robert Sideco. He'd spent most of the morning window-shopping afoot in the Loop, had spent an hour in a broker's office watching the board—something that would have surprised me except for what I'd learned from Dolan about his market activities—had had a leisurely lunch, no drinks, and then gone to the pool hall. After the pool hall he'd walked some more, at first with a friend who'd left the pool hall with him and then alone. He'd finally broken down and had a drink, one drink, at a tavern and then a solitary dinner at a cafeteria. After dinner he'd made one phone call and then had gone to a bowling alley where, after a while, he was joined by a friend, and they'd spent a couple of hours bowling. After which Robert had gone home, by bus.

Healy was tired himself after so much walking and wanted to go home as soon as he could so, especially as I didn't even have a drink around to offer him, I let him leave before I phoned Dolan to relay the report.

When I asked if he wanted Am to phone him whenever Am got home he said not if the report on Elsie was anywhere near as unexciting as the one on Robert. But that Am should stay on the tail until Elsie took another job. Or did something.

Uncle Am got home a little after eleven again; apparently the Aykers family went to bed about ten-thirty every evening. He'd had an even duller day than Healy'd had. Elsie had left the house only twice, once late morning to go to a nearby supermarket with a woman who was probably her mother, once at mid-afternoon to do a little shopping of her own; she'd gone to a nearby small department store and bought a new dress, an inexpensive one, Uncle Am thought. They'd had company for dinner, a young couple with two young children; Uncle Am thought the woman was probably an older sister of Elsie's. The company had left early, at nine, and the fights had gone off at the same time as last night. Period. Uncle Am was relieved to know he didn't have to phone Dolan; he said it sounded like a hell of a hundred dollars' worth and maybe we ought to start giving Dolan cut rates. I told him we should start thinking about it seriously if Elsie didn't start looking for another job by Monday and it began to look as though the tail job on her might be a protracted one. He agreed.

The next day, Saturday, Uncle Am dropped me off at the office again and I had an even deader day than the one before, when I had the reports to catch up on. But I killed part of the time typing up some solicitation letters to finance and loan companies and such whose names I took from the yellow pages of the phone book, telling them about our agency and what we could do for them. But I didn't date any of the letters or mail them; I didn't want to send them out until I knew we were through with *l'affaire Dolan* and would be able to take on work if somebody did call us.

I had no reason to call Dolan, but he called me at home at about half-past seven in the evening and, thank God, it was to let me off the hook for a while. Something had come up, a matter of business that had nothing conceivably to do with the case we were working on, that was going to take him out of town for twenty-four hours; he was leaving right away for Milwaukee and I could consider myself off the payroll and off standby until about this time tomorrow evening, since he would have no cause to try to reach me from Milwaukee. Uncle Am was to keep on with what he was doing.

But me, I was *free*. I stuck around just long enough to write a note to Uncle Am and then took off, without waiting to decide where I was taking off for. It didn't turn out to be anywhere very spectacular, especially since I didn't have the car. I headed into the Loop, afoot after I realized how early it was, and caught a nice combo and a fair floor show at the Crazy Cat. But I wasn't used to wild night life and got sleepy and went home, getting there just a few minutes before Uncle Am did; I wouldn't have had to leave the note after all.

He'd had another day as dull as yesterday, livened only by the fact that a young man had called and taken Elsie to an early movie. But he had her home by ten and the lights had gone out at ten-thirty as ever.

I tried to talk him into calling Starlock and getting one of Ben's operatives to take over tomorrow, Sunday, so we could both have a day off. But he wouldn't; he said his guess was Elsie would start looking for another job Monday, and until and unless Monday came and went and she hadn't, he wasn't going to share the wealth with Starlock.

But anyway I was able to sleep late Sunday morning and I did. I went to a show in the afternoon, and had me a good dinner after it, but I made sure to get home by six so I'd be there in case Dolan should get home a little sooner than he'd predicted and should want me for something or other.

And so into Sunday evening.

That's when the lid blew off.

Chapter Sixteen

Dolan phoned a little after six, just to tell me that everything was quiet and there was no reason for me to stay around on standby if there was anything else I wanted to do, but since he'd asked me to be there, we could bill him for the day anyway. I told him the hell with that; I'd waited only fifteen minutes for his call, and we were charging him plenty on other fronts.

So I was free for the evening, but I'd been out all afternoon and there wasn't anything I wanted to do, so I decided I might as well stay home and read.

I was one chapter into an Ian Fleming spy thriller when the phone rang again. I answered it with my name, and a voice I didn't recognize repeated it: "*Ed Hunter, you said? Is Am Hunter there?*"

"No," I said, "he won't be back till late tonight. Any message I should give him?"

"There's no way I can reach him?"

"Afraid not," I said. "He's working."

"Oh," the voice said. "Well, maybe you can help me. You're the nephew of his he told me about, the other one of Hunter & Hunter?"

I told him I was.

"My name is Silver, Arnold Silver. Something's come up that I need help on, and I thought of your uncle because he's the only private detective I know. But if he's working, maybe you could handle it for me?"

"Is it something in a hurry?" I asked. "At least one of us, maybe both, will be in our office tomorrow."

"I'm afraid it will have to be started tonight. Look, I live a little way out of town, west of Winnetka, about an hour's drive from where you are. Any chance you could come out right away?"

"I'd have to rent a car," I said, "or take a taxi. Could you give me any idea of the kind of job it is? There are some kinds of work we don't handle. Marital matters, for one thing."

"I know; Am mentioned that. I don't want to talk about it over the phone, but I can assure you that it's legitimate. Look, rent a car and come out. If for any reason you turn down the job, I'll pay your expenses and for your time. Okay?"

"That sounds fair enough," I said. "But for an hour's trip, you sure a taxi wouldn't be cheaper?" I had a better thought. "Or I could take the North Shore to Winnetka and a taxi from the station there."

“No, rent a car. You’ll need it later in the evening if you take on the job.”

He told me where to turn off Highway 42 in Winnetka, which is just north of Evanston, and how to go from there. It wasn’t very complicated.

When I hung up, I phoned for a cab to come right away, and then got ready, wrote a quick note to Uncle Am to tell him what went on, and went down to wait for the cab.

It came in a couple of minutes and I took it over to Michigan Avenue to the rental agency we always use when both of us need cars at the same time. I got myself a Pontiac and drove north along the lake, through Evanston and into Winnetka on 42, turned west and began following directions.

You wouldn’t think that that close to a city the size of Chicago, and between the two main Chicago-Milwaukee routes, 42 along the lake and 41 inland, you could find an unbuilt-up area and almost unused side roads, but I found them.

And it was hilly country at that, with dropoffs sometimes on one side of the road and sometimes on the other. The moonlight was bright enough to have let one drive without headlights and I could see the steep slopes. A little after the last turn on the route given me was the narrowest road yet; I was to come to the described house in just another mile.

A glance to my left, uphill, is what saved my life. I caught a glimpse, just a glimpse, of a car passing an opening in the trees. A car without lights, about fifty or sixty feet ahead of me, coming at me from a side road on what would be a collision course.

I reacted automatically; there wasn’t time to think. I let up on the accelerator, but just enough so as not to give myself away, and I was coasting and losing speed from there on. And I watched for where the side road entered mine, marked it, and just a dozen feet short of it slammed on the brake so hard that the Pontiac almost stood on its head as it shuddered to a stop. And the other car, the one without headlights, squealed brakes as it crossed in front of me, almost scraping the Pontiac’s headlights, but it couldn’t stop in time and went off the other side of the road and plunged down the steep slope.

About forty feet down it hit a tree with a hell of a crash and a rending of metal, and then there was silence, a deep silence in which I sat and trembled for maybe half a minute before I got out and started down the forty-five-degree slope. I didn’t see how anyone could possibly have lived through that crash, but I had to make sure. I had my gun ready, in case someone had.

George Steck hadn’t lived through it. I didn’t have to touch him to be sure he was dead. He’d been wearing a seat belt, but it hadn’t helped him. Not after forty feet or so down a forty-five-degree slope. The seat belt had almost cut him in half, and part of the engine was in his lap. I won’t go into any more gory details than those.

I climbed back up to the Pontiac and started it again. I was shaking and drove slowly, but I got it moving. There wasn’t room to turn there, so I drove on.

A hundred yards ahead there was a wide place in the road, and a Cadillac was parked there, the cream-colored one that was Steck's own car, the one I'd seen him drive up to Dolan's in, a few nights ago.

I hadn't even noticed the make of the would-be murder car, but to kill me with it, he'd picked one with seat belts. The plan had been simple. He'd been waiting up that side road, without lights. *My* car *had* lights, and he'd have been able to see me coming easily, a long way off, and could time his own car to hit mine amidships and knock me off the road and down the hill, and then walk back to his own car, the Caddy, and get the hell out of there.

I drove on until I found a place where I could turn the Pontiac around and head back. I was probably nearer Highway 41, but I didn't know the roads and might get lost that way; I knew I could retrace the way I came.

Sure, I should have gone to the nearest police station, in Winnetka, and reported what had happened, but why? It wasn't going to hurt Steck not to be found till tomorrow. Reporting it would tie me up with a lot of questioning, and it would blow the Dolan case sky high—and besides I was getting an awfully nasty hunch as to *why* George Steck had tried to kill me. But the hunch opened almost as many new questions as it answered old ones. I still didn't have the whole picture. I still didn't know why Mike had tried to steal a gun from me, which is what had started the whole business, at least from the Hunter point of view.

I was through Evanston before I was completely over the jitters and thinking more or less calmly about what to do next. I'd have to tell Dolan, of course. And I might as well drive out and take Uncle Am off the tail job. I didn't have the whole answer, but whatever it was, it seemed pretty certain Elsie the maid wasn't a part of it. So I wouldn't turn in the Pontiac yet. And I decided to head for the office instead of home. I've found I do some of my best thinking, such as it is, at the office in the evening when no one else is around and there are no distractions.

I let myself into the office, turned on the light, and sat down in the chair behind my desk. As though on cue, the telephone rang, and although I wouldn't know it for half an hour yet, the Dolan case was closed.

It was a soft voice, a voice from the South. A pleasant voice, with only a trace of mockery, and that mockery well deserved. The answer to my "Ed Hunter speaking":

"Is this the Mr. Hunter who represents a secretarial school for girls?"

You don't do a double-take over the telephone because you're not face to face. But you wait a few seconds before you say anything if you get a curve like that pitched at you when you don't even know you're at bat. The voice could only be that of Elsie Aykers' father—I didn't even know his first name—because he was the only person I'd ever told I'd represented a secretarial school, and I hadn't given him any name, my right one or another.

I said, "Mr. Aykers, I guess that you and your daughter have compared notes, and descriptions. I'm sorry, but yes, I was investigating her. If she has

told you what happened at the Dolan home, you'll understand why Mr. Dolan wanted—"

"I understand, Mr. Hunter. I'm not angry. But Elsie didn't take those keys, or give or sell them to anybody. They were stole from her."

I said, "Mr. Dolan couldn't be *sure* of that, and that's why he hired me to investigate. Not just your daughter; everyone else who was there."

"*Everybody?*" he asked. "Mr. Hunter, my Elsie and me, we did, like you say, compare notes. And maybe we can tell Mr. Dolan something worth something to him."

"Mr. Dolan is a generous man," I said. "I'm sure that if Elsie knows something he really wants to know, he'll do something about it."

"Just how generous do you think he might be?"

I said, "I think—" And paused to think. If the rest of the answer *was* in something Elsie knew, Dolan *would* be generous. Look what it was costing him already. Hunter & Hunter alone, with expenses and with Starlock operatives, was into him for well over a grand and it didn't seem to be worrying him in the slightest. I said, "I think it might run to putting your daughter through a secretarial school, the tuition, that is, if you're really interested in that. Are you at home?"

"I was hoping you'd say that. Yes, Elsie would like to learn to work in an office. No, we're not home. Elsie and me, we're down in the Loop. We could get to your office pretty quick. We been phoning both your home and your office for a while now."

I told him to come, and while I waited, I wondered whether I should, when they arrived, go down and pull Uncle Am in for the conference; he'd be right behind them and curious as hell when he saw where they went. I decided not to; this could be the break in the case, but also it just could be something that would make continued surveillance of Elsie more important than before.

Pretty soon I heard them in the corridor and opened the door before they quite reached it.

Ten minutes later I knew that it *was* the break in the case, and I felt like hell.

Such a simple little thing Elsie had seen. Such a deadly, nasty thing, in what it proved.

In a voice that didn't sound like my own to me—and I wonder how it sounded to them—I thanked them and said that yes, even if Dolan didn't come up with something, I'd personally make sure there'd be some money for them out of what we had coming. I didn't give a damn, right then, if they got all of it.

I walked downstairs with them and saw them to Mr. Aykers' car.

Meanwhile I'd spotted where Uncle Am was parked, and before he could take off after them, I walked back to the Buick and stopped him. "Case closed," I told him, and my voice sounded dead, even to me. "Come on upstairs and we'll call Dolan. I think I'd rather have him come here, tell him

in the office, than at his house.”

We walked upstairs and I said, “Angela. Steck.”

“You mean—talking Tuesday afternoon when Mike heard them? But Mike said two *men*.”

“Wait till I call Dolan and get him started here,” I said. I phoned Dolan, told him we had the answers and that we’d rather give them to him at our office than at his house, and he said he’d come right around.

Then I took a deep breath and started. “Angela told me the truth when she told me she’d been attracted to Steck when he first came to work for Dolan, and that her father put his foot down and wouldn’t even let her run around with someone in the rackets, let alone marry him. But she lied when she said that ended it. The affair went underground instead. They—”

“Ed, how can you know that?”

“It’s got to be for them to have a joint motive, the fact that they can’t ever get married as long as Dolan’s alive. Plus let’s say a third of at least half a million, in a lump sum to Angela. Plus a move-up in the organization for George Steck if he thought that was in line for him. How seriously they planned to kill Dolan, how close they might have come to it if Mike hadn’t blown the gaff, I don’t know. But at least they talked about it. Outside the door of Mike’s bedroom last Tuesday afternoon.”

“But, kid, Mike said he heard two *men*.”

“Elsie’s story explains that. Tuesday afternoon, somewhere around two o’clock, she went upstairs to her room to change dresses; she’d spilled something on the one she was wearing. She came back down the back stairs—when you reach the second floor you step out for a moment into the hallway, between flights, and you can see the length of the second-floor hallway.

“She saw two people standing talking in front of the door of Mike’s room. They didn’t see her, I guess. They were George Steck and Angela Dolan.”

“But, Ed, Mike said—”

“Let me finish with Elsie first, Uncle Am. She didn’t realize right away she had something important, because only parts of Mike’s story filtered down to the servants, just overheard fragments of conversations among the Dolans. But eventually she and her father, talking it out between them, decided it might be important. And of course they’re right.”

Uncle Am frowned. “Then they’re smarter than I am, Ed.”

“No, they just had a couple of days to think it over, that’s all. Think a minute about the timetable for Tuesday afternoon. After lunch, Mike’s mother puts him to bed. And then decides to go out, and Angela comes home.

“Mike thought his mother was home and his sister was out, so—Well, put yourself in Mike’s place. He thinks he hears his mother talking to a man—you know how alike Mrs. Dolan’s and Angela’s voices are—outside his door. About killing his father. And he loves both his father and his mother—probably about equally.”

“Jesus,” Uncle Am said. “He can’t let it happen. And he can’t go to his

father to tell on his mother. He could have come up with almost anything but he comes up with a story about two *men*—but before he springs it he deliberately tries to get himself arrested so that the story will be taken seriously and will stop any attempt on his father's life, and without implicating his mother."

I said, "And that's where *I* was stupid, Uncle Am. I should have seen Tuesday night that Mike wasn't really coming for a gun. Even he's smart enough to know that wouldn't do him any good. I was stupid or I should have realized from the timing—he came within one minute of my turning out the light; he must have been watching from across the street for it to go out—that he was *trying* to get caught. He wanted to be pinched so he'd be taken seriously, and he'd have succeeded, would have *made* me call copper if he hadn't overlooked the fact that he had identification in his wallet. Jesus."

"H. Christ," Uncle Am said. "And it's right because it just doesn't fit any other way. Angela saw what had happened, and was scared, because if Mike ever changed his story and told it the right way, Dolan would know the truth. Because Dolan knew, as Mike didn't, that it was his sister who was home."

I nodded. "Angela was plenty scared, even that first night. She knew Mike had overheard an actual conversation—she and Steck hadn't been careful because they had no idea Mike was in his room instead of at school. And she guessed why he'd reported that conversation a bit different from the way he'd heard it, and she knew that if he ever changed his story—"

"Kid," Uncle Am interrupted me, "this isn't going to help your ego, but don't you think it was because she was so scared that she went to the length she did to get you on her side, and get you to promise to keep her posted on anything that happened?"

"I guess that was part of it. But damn it, she wasn't acting all the way, even if she was in love with Steck. Well, Wednesday the danger got even closer to her because Dolan made an appointment with a child psychologist to talk to Mike. There was even a possibility of scopolamine being tried on him.

"And that's why, Wednesday night, they—or, anyway, Angela—got desperate. Why she had George hit her twice, enough to mark her and make it look good, so she could confirm Mike's story about two men being in the Dolan house. Of course it didn't happen there at all. Probably at Steck's apartment, with him staying there afterward to give himself an alibi in case Dolan called him—as Dolan did. And that's it, except we can add a few details like Angela going to Elsie's room any time Wednesday to lift Elsie's keys from her purse to spread a bit of suspicion."

"Case closed. But, kid, do we have any proof?"

"Elsie's story. Mike's—when he changes it, and he will, I think, when it's laid out for him. Even without scopolamine. And the fact that George Steck tried to kill me an hour and a half ago."

"*What?*" It wasn't Uncle Am asking; it was Dolan. We hadn't heard him in the hallway and he'd just opened the door.

He came on in. "You say Steck tried to kill you? Tonight?"

I nodded. "All right, I'll tell you that first, and then go back." I started with the phone call that I'd taken in our room a little after six, just after Dolan's call.

I said, "It didn't sound like Steck's voice, but—"

"He's good at voice imitations," Dolan said. "It's his one parlor trick. Did he use an accent?"

"A moderate Jewish accent," I told him. "And that fitted with the name he gave, Silver. That's not a common English name; it's usually a bobbed version of Silverstein or Silverberg or something."

"That would have been Steck. He could imitate any accent, perfectly. Good, then he didn't have an accomplice. All right, how did he try to kill you?"

I told them, and they were both staring at me when I'd finished.

"But *why*?" Dolan asked. "Why would he want to kill you?"

I took a deep breath and said, "Let me start at the beginning." And I started at the beginning and told it through, in better sequence than the way I'd just given it to Uncle Am before Dolan had come.

Dolan had looked fifty, a vigorous fifty, when he'd come into our office. He looked sixty, and tired, when I'd finished.

He sat a full minute in silence before he finally asked a question: "What about the police?"

I said, "No crime was committed. Steck tried to commit one, but his own death was an accident. The cops will find the circumstances strange, him dead in a stolen car his own car parked nearby. They may ask you some questions since he worked for you, but—"

"The hell with Steck," he said. "What about Angela?"

"Up to you," I said. "But I'd suggest psychiatric help. When she knows that you know the whole story, she'll go along with it, if only for selfish reasons at first. She's of age and all you have to do is threaten to disinherit her, leave her flat broke. At that price, my guess is she'll go along with anything. Maybe at first she'll just pretend, and be cynical, but if the right psychoanalyst—or even psychiatrist, if it comes to that—gets her and gets *through* to her..."

He nodded slowly and walked toward the door. But he turned with his hand on the knob. "Still one question. Why did Steck try to kill you?"

I said, "We'll probably never know, unless Angela tells you. One guess, as good as another. Maybe Steck wanted to back out of their plot, finally. Maybe she thought she could keep him in line by making him jealous, and told him some story about her and me."

"Kid," Uncle Am said, "that could have happened the night she got beat up, and could have been the first result of her telling him something like that. It could have been on her way home that she got the idea of parlaying those bruises into a story about two men attacking her at home." It could have been

that way too, I decided. I just nodded.

Dolan looked at me for a moment, but didn't ask whether there'd been any truth in whatever story Angela might have told Steck about me.

When he left neither of us suggested leaving with him, although there was nothing to keep us here. Like a zombie he was walking, and he was very obviously wanting to be alone.

We just sat there a few minutes, I in my chair and Uncle Am on the corner of my desk, and then I looked at him and asked, "Well, Uncle Am, what shall we do, get drunk?"

I don't know whether I meant it seriously or not, but he shook his head. "Kid, that doesn't work. But I do have an idea. Let's do have *a* drink, maybe even two, somewhere on the way home. The Green Cat?"

I dug him, dug why he'd chosen the place where I'd taken Angela for drinks late Tuesday evening. You don't run away from a thing; you meet it. If there'd been any reasonable excuse for me to do so I'd even have gone to see my beautiful raven-haired, milk-white Irish princess. My so beautiful, so round-heeled—yes, I had to use that term now that I knew she'd gone to bed with me while she was in love with someone else—so sweet, so lovely, so murderous Irish princess.

So we went to The Green Cat and again it wasn't crowded, this time because it was so early. Early? God, how much had happened since six o'clock, and it was just nine now. And still Sunday evening. I pushed it, since there was a choice of booths, by taking the same one, but I didn't mention that to Uncle Am, and maybe he guessed and maybe he didn't.

He said, "Kid, we need a break. A vacation, a change. And I know how we can take a short one—even a change from one another—without even having to close down the agency."

"How?" I asked.

"Carey Stofft, remember? Wednesday—or was it Thursday?—we got that letter from him. He's with the Yates Carnival and it's opening in Gary, Indiana tomorrow. We were both invited to come down for the week they'll play there and live in his trailer right on the carney lot. Kid, why don't we take him up on that—separately, which'll be easier on him besides letting us keep the agency open? You go down tomorrow morning, stay three days while I mind the store, come back Wednesday night or Thursday morning or sometime, and I'll go down the last three days of the week and let you mind the store."

I said, "Why not?" and we did.

Just like that, I left the next morning, and Carey was glad to see me and even gladder to hear he'd have Am the last part of the week, and I had a couple of nice days on the lot staying in his trailer and being *with it* again, but a couple of days was enough and Wednesday morning I came back. It was about half-past eleven when I got to the office.

"Okay," I told Uncle Am. "I'll watch the store. You can take off."

"Tonight, Ed. Besides, I got something for you to do this afternoon."

"Sure. What?"

He held up a check. "Five grand. Dolan. I figured his bill and sent it. Thirteen hundred fifty-eight and some cents. Apparently he didn't like it. He sent this check instead."

"Great," I said, and meant it. "But you want me to spend this afternoon depositing it? Or what?"

"It's been nine days," he said. "You ought to be about ready to *think* about blowing a trombone. Since you're back early, take the afternoon to pick out the best one in Chicago. Sure, go home and get your old one first; even if it can't be repaired, you'll get a nuisance-value trade-in on it.

"Okay," I said. "But hell, take off, Uncle Am. I can do that tomorrow."

"And who'll watch the shop tomorrow if I take off tonight? Ed, it's a lousy week. Outside of this five grand we haven't made a Goddam cent. Look, since you're here, you hold the fort while I go down and feed my face and then—"

And then the phone rang, and I was nearer to my phone than Uncle Am was to his so I answered it.

"Ed Hunter," I said. Not brilliant, but better than a Mrs. Murphy bit; I'd cured myself of that, with two tries.

"Ed, this is Molly. Molly Czerwinski. I got back from Indianapolis this morning. Remember what I called you about early last week? I mean, about seeing if you can find my ex-husband who ran off with all of what he sold our house for and—"

"Molly, sure," I said. "Hell, yes, I remember. That's my specialty, remembering. Details and all, the few you gave me. Are you free now?"

"Yes. I'm home, Ed. Out near Howard. It would take me, oh, between half an hour and an hour to get to your office address. Should I start now or let you have lunch first?"

I said, "Start now and let me take you to lunch when you get here." And she said fine, and I told Uncle Am the score and for him to go to lunch right away, so he could be back by the time I would want to take off.

He grinned at me. "Molly Czerwinski? Do I remember your saying she had the cutest derriere in American History?"

I said, "In American History *class*, at high school. Now scram." He scrambled.

Molly got there a little less than an hour later. She was beautiful. The eight years or whatever it was since I'd seen her last had improved the hell out of her. She gave me a hand and said, "Hi, Ed," and I took the hand and said, "Hi, Molly." And then told her we were practically out to lunch, but if she'd wait a few minutes she could meet my uncle who ran the agency with me. And meanwhile she could start telling me the score, starting with her married name, especially if she used it now. She did, she explained; it made a better working name for her teaching of dancing than Czerwinski.

And Uncle Am came in and I stood up. "Uncle Am," I said, "I want you to

meet Mrs. Murphy.”

She stood up and moved toward him, putting out her hand, and he started to take it—and then exploded. I can call it only that; it started with a coughing fit or what seemed to be one, but went on from there till I was pounding him on the back to let him breathe, and he and I finally got him the hell out of the door on his way down to the drugstore on the nearest corner for some cough medicine.

“Let me apologize for him, Molly,” I said. “Once in a while, not very often, he gets a spell like that. Elixir terpin hydrate is the only thing that will fix it. Then he’s fine for another year or so. I’m sorry.”

She frowned at me. “But *you* should have gone down to get it for him, Ed, and left him here.”

“Sit down again, Molly,” I said. “He wouldn’t have wanted it that way, I know. But we might as well wait now till he comes back, and do you want to tell me a bit more about this Dick Murphy you married? Let’s start with where and when you met him.”

She started and was still talking when the phone rang. I knew who it would be, and I knew, except for the phrase itself, what he was about to say.

“Kid,” the phone said, “who gave such a merry air to Mrs. Murphy’s derriere?”

I started to sputter myself, and then straightened out. I said, “Damn it, that’s not fair, when I can’t—Wait a minute, why can’t I—on a do-it-yourself basis? Here we go. Fire ants. Underpants.”

He said wonderingly, “Who put the fire ants in Mrs. Murphy’s underpants? Kid, that’s as good as mine. A draw?”

“A draw,” I said. “Get the hell back here, and this time be ready to fly right.”

I hung up and looked into Mrs. Murphy’s eyes, and they were as wide with curiosity as any beautiful eyes I’d ever seen.

“Ed! That must have been your uncle, calling from the drugstore, since you said get *back* here, but *what* were you talking about? Fire ants, underpants? I’ll go crazy if you don’t tell me!”

I grinned. “Maybe, right now, you’d go crazier if I did. Molly, maybe I’ll be able to tell you someday, but not right now. Not just at this moment.”

And I was thinking, we don’t make a barrel of money, Uncle Am and I, except maybe once in a hell of a long time, but we do sometimes have fun, and I like it.